RESEARCH ARTICLE

TRANSCENDING THE SELF FOR THE OTHER: LEVINAS'S VISION OF COEXISTENCE IN THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

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Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) centered his philosophical work on the human dimension, particularly in relation to the Other. This marked a departure from the traditional philosophical focus on the self and abstract existence. Levinas introduced a significant shift in philosophical discourse by grounding ethics in the relationship with the Other, emphasizing existence as fundamentally relational. He highlighted concepts such as solidarity, friendship, and love, placing ethical responsibility at the core of the self–Other relationship and rejecting the exclusion of the diverse Other. Accordingly, he consistently affirmed coexistence with the Other, even in the face of denial or attempts to negate their presence.

This study employed a critical-analytical approach to clarify the key motivations behind Levinas's focus on the Other and the necessity of mutual responsibility between self and Other. It concluded that Levinas's philosophy embraces all aspects of human life, presenting a socially significant ethical framework aimed at overcoming violence and fostering communication between self and Other.

Keywords: Self; Other; Western Rationality; Ethics; Responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

Levinas's philosophy of existence arises from his engagement with lived experience (*vécu*) in the contemporary context, where he critiques philosophy's failure to place the Other at its center. He sought to replace traditional philosophical egocentrism by bringing the self-down from an abstract "heaven" to the concrete "ground" of reality—a shift prompted by the neglect of the Other. As a result, his ethical philosophy became significant in modern thought, noted for its emphasis on ethical relationships, its rejection of violence and intolerance, and its call for unconditional responsibility toward the Other and liberation from selfish egoism.

Levinas maintains that one must transcend the enclosed self to embrace the Other, asserting that this encounter preserves difference and affirms ethical values such as love, friendship, and generosity. He argues that ethics goes beyond behavioral norms, forming a value system grounded in the face of the Other—seen as a call to responsibility and the foundation of all existential relations.

1.1 Study Problem

Building on the foregoing analysis, this paper centers on the following research problem:

- How can the transcendent self-accept the Other without being absorbed by it?
- What constitutes Levinas's ethical responsibility, and what is the nature of this ethics?

From this principal question, several subsidiary inquiries arise, including:

- What are the dimensions of Levinas's ethical philosophy?
- How does communication contribute to the construction of social peace and the resolution of conflict?
- What is the potential for a critical approach to Levinas's philosophy?

1.2 Study Significance

This study is significant for its focus on the relationship between the self and the Other in Levinas's philosophy—a dyad often neglected in traditional philosophical approaches. Levinas set himself apart by placing ethics at the core of philosophy, giving priority to the ethical dimension over comprehensive metaphysics. This stance earned him the title "philosopher of the ethics of ethics." The study clarifies the features of this ethical perspective and its place in contemporary philosophical discourse.

1.3 Study Objective

This paper examines a persistent metaphysical and ethical dilemma that continues to be relevant in modern philosophical discussions: the relationship between the self and the Other. It explores what Levinas calls the "cogito of goodness," which holds that to be human is to embody love and acceptance toward the Other, recognizing that the rights of the Other arise from the self's willingness to acknowledge their existence. This model is central to Levinas's effort to establish a foundation for human progress.

The study clarifies Levinas's critique of modernity, which, while promoting the ideal of humanity, centers the self and reason in all relationships. In contrast, Levinas seeks to overcome this egocentrism by redefining the self's role—from guardian of being to guardian of the Other—thus embracing sacrifice and ethical responsibility toward the Other.

1.4 Study Methodology

This study adopts an analytical method, appropriate to the specific problem under investigation and the nature of the topic. It involves an examination of the foundations of ethical responsibility as articulated by Levinas, along with an exploration of their philosophical and ethical basis.

2. Levinas's Philosophy as an Alternative to Traditional Ontology:

Levinas places the concept of the Other at the center of his philosophy, stemming from his critique of its marginalization in earlier philosophies that prioritized the self and being, thereby neglecting the relationship with the Other. He focuses on the concrete existent rather than abstract being, emphasizing the importance of the connection between self and Other while rejecting simplified views that sideline the Other.

His writings express deep concern for the ethics of relating to the Other as a separate being—one who is not absorbed into the self but stands apart, with their own being and meaning. This recognition does not diminish the self; rather, it enriches its relationship with the Other through tolerance, love, altruism, and acknowledgment of difference.

Levinas asserts that the relationship with the Other precedes the self's relationship with itself or with the external world, establishing a distinct ontological dimension without negating the self. On the contrary, it affirms the self's existence through the recognition of the Other. The encounter between self and Other initiates a dialogue that questions the centrality of the ego and makes space for respecting difference. Through mutual respect and actions grounded in "hospitality," individuals can form a noble relationship that transcends conflict and strife.

In this framework, the self and the Other move toward a responsible relationship that avoids past mistakes and seeks communication based on understanding and tolerance, rather than exclusion and denial.

Levinas was concerned with the marginalized individual who had been excluded by the Western metaphysical discourse that characterized modern philosophy with its monologic nature through the concept of the conscious self and reason. Absolute freedom, in turn, resulted in confining knowledge to man's knowledge of himself and the self's awareness of itself, without this self caring to know the "Other" who differs from it. According to this philosophy, the relationship between the "I" and the "Other" became one of assimilation, meaning that the "I" seeks to make the "Other" identical to itself, thereby failing to respect the latter's alterity (Snoussi 2022, 127).

This, in fact, indicates that Levinas presented a different approach from the prevailing one, deconstructing the monism of the self and focusing on its relationship with the Other. As a contemporary philosopher opposing traditional thought, he directed his criticism toward every position that made Western centrality—based on the centrality of the self—its guiding principle. He transcended all traditional philosophies by presenting a perspective that placed *existence* before *man*, thus opening up to a world of unity within diversity, penetrating the closed realm of subjectivity, dismantling the fortresses of the ego, and laying the foundations for bridges of communication and dialogue among peoples. In doing so, he rejected all forms of conflict and liberated humanity from egocentric tendencies in order to build a universal human identity.

From this perspective, Levinas presents an ethical paradox between ontology and ethics: ontology exalts the self, while ethics places the Other above all else. He writes, "Ethics, as the primary philosophy, imparted meaning to human existence... Thus, a conflict exists between ethics and ontology, as ethics refers to the metaphysical realm that ontology cannot reach, specifically otherness. The primacy of ethics is predicated on the primacy of the Other, which stands in opposition to the primacy attributed to the self by ontology" (E. Levinas 2014, 08-09). For Levinas, responsibility toward the Other becomes the foundation of human truth, shifting emphasis from the centrality of the self to the ethical priority of relationality.

Levinas's critique of Western metaphysics commences with his repudiation of the reduction of the relationship with the Other to a mere ontological amalgamation. He contends that the self should neither encompass nor deny

the Other, but must acknowledge the Other as a distinct entity and participate in a relationship defined by differentiation and dialogue. In this framework, metaphysics serves as a tool of exclusion by prioritizing the self and negating intersubjectivity. Levinas elucidates this by stating, "Since metaphysics constitutes a firm ground for being, it renders the self-centered on itself, denying the meaning of the Other and rejecting intersubjectivity" (E. Levinas 2007, 88). Levinas thus establishes a foundation for a redefined comprehension of metaphysics, predicated on receptivity to the Other rather than subjugation of it.

Acknowledging the Other, actively listening to their voice, and confronting their visage necessitate the acceptance of responsibility for their existence. This, for Levinas, constitutes the essence of theoretical ethics in every human relationship. Jacqueline Rose (1949) notes that "On his face was inscribed the command 'Thou shalt not kill,' and before it theoretical ethics unfolds; it is a demand intertwined with the face, a summons to ethics and to God." Levinas connects ethical responsibility to God's presence, saying that the only way to find meaning in life is to be open to others instead of being selfish. This idea breaks with earlier philosophies and changes the focus of modern philosophical thought from ontology to ethics as the first philosophy. It creates a transcendent humanistic philosophy that goes beyond traditional metaphysics in search of a more ethical and inclusive humanity.

3. Levinas and the Critique of Western Rational Discourse

There is no doubt that Levinas was influenced by European culture, especially its religious aspects, as well as the philosophical ideas that formed the basis of his ethical project. This project is based on the Torah and the Talmud, which are Jewish religious texts. It uses values that have to do with people and complicated situations like war, peace, and difference, and it calls for cooperation and coexistence. Levinas posits that the Torah serves as a fundamental source for human values, infusing the soul with a moral dimension through direct engagement with the Other, thereby establishing a relationship with the infinite (Dourty 2009, 269). The Other is not God, but one hears the word of God in the Other's face; therefore, ethics is defined as a duty to the Other.

The holiness of the sacred manifests in human relationships as a reflection of the divine, with the acknowledgment of the Other as the foundation of ethics stemming from a transcendent religious experience, where "love is the path to God," and "the existence of God is merely a narrative of revelation embedded in the Torah's history" (Kearney 1995, 183) God cannot be proven but is evident in human relationships, where existence precedes belief. Recognizing the humanity of the Other is a duty that exists before any positive legal text, indicating the existence of the sacred. The divine self, while transcendent, entails a responsibility towards the Other.

Levinas transcends conventional ontological inquiries regarding the divine self-prevalent in Jewish thought, positing that knowledge of God is attainable solely through the Other, due to the divine self's transcendence, which necessitates an ethical rather than an ontological approach. He repudiates the notion of "divine humility that merges into the human," underscoring the significant disparity between the divine and the human, and contends that transformation or subsumption between the two is unattainable (Sayed 2018, 387).

After this change, it is important to focus on the human subject, which is similar to what Protagoras (490–420 BCE) said when he said, "man is the measure of all things." As a result, inquiry was confined to the individual self; however, it is indisputable that the self-necessitates the Other, as humans are intrinsically social entities, requiring the existence of an interlocutor or counterpart to the self.

Levinas's ideas show how ancient philosophers have affected him. One example is the Socratic maxim "Know thyself," which is written on the Temple of Delphi. This idea encourages the self to be open to itself without needing the Other. This signifies a philosophical shift from the examination of the cosmos to an emphasis on the individual, enhancing the focus on the self. Nevertheless, the self is intrinsically reliant on the Other, as humans are social entities necessitating an existence that aligns with the self.

Levinas's philosophy is also influenced by Husserl (1859–1938) and Heidegger (1889–1976), especially in his argument to connect the self and the Other through phenomenology to comprehend their relationship, as discourse regarding the self is devoid of significance without the existence of another capable of communication. Levinas, therefore, repudiated philosophies that exalt the self while sidelining the Other, deeming such communication as unilateral and diminishing the Other to a mere facet of the self (Moualek and Zawi 2022, 850). His goal was to create a space where people could interact with each other without leaving out differences.

Levinas also rejected the idea of a transcendent self that sees the Other as just a thing that can be put into a category. He said that the Other cannot be reduced or ontologically subsumed. Husserl, on the other hand, connected this to the phenomenological reduction, which means putting aside all previous judgments about all external phenomena in relation to the human subject while also undermining and rejecting all previous justifications during this time (Masri 2023, 2576). Levinas advanced an ethical framework that elevates the Other,

asserting that ethical responsibility emerges not merely from the suspension of judgment but from acknowledging the Other as a distinct entity that cannot be assimilated into the self's experience.

Levinas, despite being profoundly influenced by phenomenology, did not embrace it as a primary methodology, building upon his critique of it; his ethical perspective repudiates reductionism and symmetrical relations that marginalize the Other. Nonetheless, he recognizes phenomenology's contribution to unveiling and acknowledging the "face," as the encounter with the face embodies an ethical obligation. Levinas posits that the face constitutes the origin of ethics, signifying a reappraisal of Husserlian phenomenology. In this manner, Levinas reoriented phenomenology to focus on establishing a relationship grounded in ethical responsibility rather than mere knowledge or cognition.

Levinas was heavily influenced by Heidegger's philosophy, but he also strongly criticized Heidegger, especially in his book Time and the Other, where he disagreed with Heidegger's idea that the self is more important than the Other. Levinas contended that Heidegger obscured the ethical aspect of human relations, asserting: "Heidegger presents the relation with the Other as an ontological structure of Dasein... This relation plays no role neither in the drama of Being nor in the existential analytic; all analyses revolve around the impersonality of everyday life or the solitary Dasein" (E. Levinas 2014, 36). Levinas advocated for a reconstruction of metaphysics grounded in ethical principles sourced from sacred texts, highlighting the alterity of the Other and seeking to foster a human dialogue that transcends identity-based conflict. He asserted that the good can only be realized beyond the framework of Dasein's logic.

Levinas rejects the precedence of *Being* over *the existent*; hence, he proposed an ethical approach, since what Heidegger offered had no tangible impact on the world of existence. Moreover, the freedom Heidegger advocated made the human self saturated with self-love and egoism, resulting in a self-centered orientation — one of the main traits of modern man. The latter, whenever given the opportunity, reveals his evil nature as a consequence of the absolute freedom man has enjoyed.

With Levinas, philosophy took ethics as its *first philosophy*, a stance that stems from lived reality, particularly in light of the preoccupation with *Being* and the neglect of *the existent* — the *Other*. If Western metaphysics represented, for Heidegger, a "forgetfulness of Being," it became, for Levinas, a "forgetfulness of the existent." Thus, Levinas established a rupture with Heideggerian thought and introduced a shift in the legacy of philosophical reflection by linking *Being* to *the Infinite* and introducing the *Other* into philosophy through ethics.

Western philosophy, which emphasized the centrality of the self and denied the being of the Other—even when it approached the self merely to understand itself—became the target of Levinas's deconstruction. He sought to dismantle this centrality, to focus instead on the ethics of communication and love, and to transcend differences in pursuit of a universal identity that achieves unity within diversity (Mostafa and Khaled 2018, 05-06). In this sense, Levinas renders the concept of *the Good* transcendent above all other concepts, thereby signaling a return to Platonic thought (Daniel 2018, 251).

4. The Foundation of Ethics: Responsibility Toward the Other

It cannot be denied that the centrality of the self has, in one way or another, led to the negation and marginalization of the Other from existence — despite calls for recognizing the Other — as a result of the excessive preoccupation with interpreting *Being*. Many technical and scientific studies have pointed out that this preoccupation has surpassed the boundaries of human dignity. Therefore, numerous philosophers have called for restoring the importance of moral and human systems and recognizing the Other — a stance embodied in Levinas's discourse of acknowledging the Other.

The mission entrusted to contemporary philosophical discourse is not so much to define the features of epistemological or ontological discourse as it is a call to openness toward the Other, for it is the Other who defines my existence. Thus, respecting and accepting the Other as my counterpart without reducing him to myself is an expression of my moral responsibility that shapes my relationship with him.

According to Levinas, the relationship with the Other places me in a position of questioning, empties me of myself, and continues to do so as I constantly discover new sources of meaning. This ethical *alterity* is grounded in what Levinas calls *the experience of the face*, which defines the responsibility of the self toward the Other—without expecting any return or reward (Nfaif 2024, 137).

It is morally necessary to see the Other as something that cannot be changed or negotiated. The existence of the Other takes precedence over all else, and our duty towards them is dictated by a communicative relationship that upholds the principles of dialogue and denounces violence, thereby seeking authentic recognition. Levinas's philosophy aims to elucidate the metaphysical aspect of human relationships through our obligation to the Other (Zerroukhi 2014, 172). In this process, being attains a humanized essence, transforming the encounter with the Other into an ethical occurrence that emancipates the self from egotism and necessitates a relationality founded

on respect rather than exclusion. It is therefore essential to establish an ethically grounded existential harmony between the *I* and the *Other* — affirming the principle of *nonviolence*, which should characterize the self's relationship and behavior toward the Other, and reinforcing the importance of ethics, the wisdom of love, and human goodness (Yamina 2021, 152).

Levinas reconfigures human relationships based on love, solidarity, and tolerance, moving them away from closure and creating a nexus between self and Other. In Time and the Other, he asserts, "This relation is the relation to the human Other" (E. Levinas 2014, 91). Engagement with the Other constitutes an invitation to hospitality, coexistence, and celebration, thereby reinstating the ethical and human dimension by transforming the Other from a theoretical abstraction into concrete reality; nothing transcends the humanity of the individual.

Levinas thus redefines the relationship between the ego and the Other, transcending conventional philosophical frameworks rooted in conflict and contradiction. Instead of focusing on the self, he stresses that the Other is the basis of the ethical relationship and that acknowledging and being responsible for the Other is necessary for the self to exist. People can't live alone because they need other people to be real. To exist is to exist for the Other, governed by an ethical obligation to protect the Other as one would safeguard oneself—free from selfishness or exclusion.

From Levinas's perspective, difference is the starting point for a new kind of relationship—one that makes the self-more human and elevates the virtue of sacrifice for the Other, who is more sacred than anything sacred (E. Levinas 1958, 85-86). Levinas's phenomenology of the face is at the heart of this. It shows a moment of revelation and manifestation. The face shows that the Other is present, not absent. When one meets the face, a relationship forms that sets the rules for how to talk to each other. Levinas states, "When I engage in dialogue with the Other, I am aware that it is a dialogue between the self—the host—and the Other—the guest" (E. Levinas 2005, 138). This emphasizes that this relationship goes beyond all positive laws because it is based on social and moral principles.

Levinas's philosophy encapsulates an ethical commitment to the Other, promoting sacrifice for their sake while necessitating reciprocity to prevent mistakes that result in violence, stemming from unacknowledged differences and rejection of diversity. To avert such consequences, it is essential to invoke the principles of love, solidarity, and cooperation, thereby reinstating these concepts with a renewed significance previously lacking in Western thought. The concept of subjectivity in Levinas's philosophy is linked to moral responsibility, as man is considered the guardian of his fellow man. The *face* directs a discourse toward the *I*, which in turn bears responsibility for the Other — a responsibility that cannot be renounced or abandoned (Rahim 2018, 66).

Levinas set forth various conditions for the actualization of his ethical philosophy. First, he stressed that people need to give up the comforts of civilization and live with humility by sharing at least the bare minimum. Second, he said that people should live "under the shade of the fig and olive trees." This means bringing back values, taking responsibility for peace, and being willing to take risks to get it. Third, he emphasized the significance of deriving lessons from solitude, converting a fragile consciousness into a wellspring of strength, and transforming self-effacement into a source of pride (Mabrouk 2015, 07).

So, the relationship with the Other goes beyond just using each other for things; it is based on love and tolerance within a deep spiritual connection. Thus, self-love emanates from love for the Other. Levinas asserts, "Love remains a relation to the Other turned toward need, and this latter presupposes everything that is external and transcendent so as to include the Other and the beloved, extending beyond the beloved" (E. Levinas 1969, 285). This strengthens the ethical sense of responsibility, as a human being cannot exist without the Other, due to their inherently social nature.

5. Religion and Social Ethics:

Modern societies around the world are going through a crisis of ideas and culture that has many different causes, including social, economic, and religious ones. Religion often acts as a source of conflict and division among groups of people, with each faith asserting its claim to absolute truth. This has led to bad effects on people's mental and social health, making the gaps between countries even bigger. So, it's important to rethink religious ideas and move toward a way of thinking that accepts differences without turning them into a source of conflict. Religion possesses notable importance in the history of human thought, particularly concerning politics, as evidenced in contemporary and secular philosophy.

Levinas examines religion through the lens of social ethics, contending that religious discourse attains its transcendent quality from its metaphysical foundation, especially in its ethical aspect. He vehemently opposed the constricted ideological interpretations of religion, particularly when embraced by extremist movements hostile to secularism and humanism. Levinas asserts that religion must occupy a crucial position within pluralistic freedoms and democracy, transcending hierarchical interpretations of the spiritual relationship between

humanity and the divine. He contends, "We cannot characterize religion as a relationship because, upon examining the essence of this relationship, we conceive it as a manifestation of totality by correlating or equating the two terms of the relation" (E. Levinas 2007, 79). He perceives this notion as devoid of significance and efficacy in reality, differentiating religion as an experiential phenomenon from mere spiritual abstraction. Levinas therefore stresses both the idea of religion and how it is used in society.

Levinas posits that authentic religion constitutes the relationship between the self and the Other, contrasting with any totalizing system that subsumes the Other. Religion cannot be confined to sacred texts, as these may occasionally neglect the suffering and anxiety of the Other. Levinas connects ethics and religion by saying that religion without ethics is "empty, meaningless, and reduced to mere formal rituals" (Sean 1989, 67). He posits ethics as the cornerstone of religion, conceptualizing it as a framework that surpasses conventional religious dialogue and promotes coexistence and the acceptance of the Other. Otherwise, people could go back to a primitive state where "man is a wolf to man."

Levinas also rejects religious fundamentalism when it leads to a refusal to sacrifice for the Other, as this inevitably breeds violence. Including an ethical aspect in the study of religions makes people feel more at ease and less afraid of the Other. From this standpoint, Levinas advocates for receptiveness to various cultures and religions, urging the treatment of their adherents as individuals rather than solely through the prism of their beliefs. This method improves dialogue by making it more than just asking questions; the goal is to get closer to the truth of dialogue itself (Qusayr 2018, 286). This strengthens the Other's dignity and freedom through the active practice of dialogue. The suffering that Levinas experienced led him to give difference a religious dimension through the term *"neighbor"*. One exists *for the neighbor*, meaning that the Other is not a stranger (El-Sayed 2018, 230).

Levinas stresses that dialogue is an urgent need, especially after the tragedies of the twentieth century, like the Holocaust, which the Jewish people went through because dialogue didn't have an ethical side. Levinas, therefore, rejects a purely cognitive understanding of religion (Moualek and Zawi 2022, 849), asserting that this interpretation undermines religious coexistence; familiarity with one religion frequently results in the marginalization of another. Consequently, religion should be examined ethically, acknowledging that its followers are individuals worthy of respect. Levinas's philosophy is based on the idea of meeting the Other. He says that the self only exists in relation to the Other, which he makes clear in his book "The Humanism of the Other." This indicates that Levinas's ethical philosophy is fundamentally a social philosophy, as it advocates for humanity and, in particular, for transcendence rather than conflict (Helmy 2019, 918).

6. Conclusion:

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that Levinas's philosophy is based on deconstructing the centrality of the self and clarifying the identity of the Other through a metaphysical dimension that goes beyond ontology, thereby shifting the focus of philosophy from "being" to "existent." In this context, the face of the Other becomes the basis of ethical consciousness, imposing on the self an absolute moral obligation toward the Other. The self's subjectivity is revealed through religious practice, which discloses the humanity of the Other. Levinas's philosophy, shaped by his Jewish heritage, carries a distinct ethical dimension that calls for coexistence without exclusion.

Levinas aimed to reform the relationship between the self and the Other by freeing the latter from the self's egoism and incorporating the Other into the self's responsibilities. He supported a relationship built on dialogue, recognition, and mutual love, and he opposed all forms of violence and domination. He believed that the divine commandment "Thou shalt not kill" means being responsible for the Other, as the Other is the path to God.

Levinas criticized modernity for positioning the self as a closed center, as seen in the work of Descartes (1596–1650), Kant (1724–1804), and Hegel (1770–1831), where otherness was subordinated to the self. This exclusion led to major social and political crises, expressed in concepts like the "superior man" and the dominance of the self over the Other. Levinas therefore called for the transcendence of isolated Western rationality, asserting that recognizing the Other's difference is essential for developing self-identity—a pivotal step in the history of philosophical thought.

Levinas called for recognizing the Other and adopting ethical behavior toward them. However, he showed a clear bias toward his Jewish identity, as seen in the idea of the "crisis-ridden Other," where he favored the Jewish self over others and overlooked the Arab-Islamic Other. For example, the Islamic concept of jihad is directed at injustice, not at difference, but Levinas did not take a clear stance on Zionist violence, even though he criticized Heidegger for remaining silent about Nazism. This suggests that Levinas's concept of the "Other" primarily included the Jewish person seeking global recognition, while marginalizing the Arab-Islamic self, despite its representation of otherness. It appears he viewed the Jewish self as the ideal model of civilization, which limited his idea of otherness to a narrow geographical and cultural scope—one that ultimately ignored the Palestinian cause.

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