

Revisiting Levinas Ethics as the First Philosophy

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Abstract—My paper discusses Levinas Ethics as the First Philosophy. In my paper I talked about the background of Levinas, importance of Levinas Ethical Notion as the First Philosophy, the criticism of various approaches of western philosophical tradition given by Levinas, Levinas notion of 'Other', which is taken as essential to his ethical notion, various aspects of the concept of 'other', which is linked with hospitality, responsibility, freedom, justice and religion, the positive analysis given by different scholars on Levinas ethical notion and the critical study of Levinas ethical notion given by different scholars and conclusion.

1. BACKGROUND OF LEVINAS

Emmanuel Levinas (1906- 1995), a French Jewish philosopher, was regarded as one of the most important continental philosophers of twentieth century. He teaches morality to those intellectual elite, who think themselves as intelligent and cultured. He wanted to show them that morality is a matter for both adults and intelligent adults and regards morality as highest individual humanity of the human. He is very well known in matter of ethics because he regards '*Ethics as First Philosophy*'. His development of philosophical thinking took the help from phenomenological tradition. He takes war as the destruction of morality.

His major work was named as *Totality and Infinity*. A book on '*Husserl's phenomenology*' was written by him and he also began an exploration of Heidegger's ideas and thought. According to him, being and non-being are regarded as totalitarian concept, but "beings other" broke such totalitarian concept. "He regards philosophy as the work of reflection on our unreflective everyday life. For him, phenomenology only gives us the notion of deduction and it goes from the naive to the scientific." He started thinking on the purpose and idea of philosophy. He was regarded as an existential philosopher also. He also translated in French the work of Husserl and Heidegger. He challenged the foundations of western philosophy. Levinas reformulates metaphysics, and gives importance to the ethical supremacy of the 'other'. He does not give any theory of ethics. His main task was to describe the meaning of ethical relation.

He was regarded as the only continental philosopher who contradicts Cartesian subjectivity, Hegel view of totalitarian, Kantian freedom and autonomy, Husserl phenomenology and Heidegger ontology. He wrote a first book named as

'*Existence and Existents*' in 1947. His next book was named as '*Time and Other*', which he wrote in 1948.

The Importance of Levinas Ethics as the First Philosophy

The study of ethics, when seen from the general sense deals with the problems that are confined to the morality. According to Levinas, philosophical problems can only be understood from the ethical point of view and the term 'ethics' refers to a relation of an infinite responsibility toward other persons. He says that Heidegger discusses ontology and Husserl discusses epistemology, but both ignore *ethics*. The idea of morality and one's responsibility to other are regarded as essential traits of his philosophy. We wrongly understand him and say that Levinas is engaged in ethical theory or moral theory. The ethics as first philosophy for him does not mean ethical theory or a system of ethics.

The Criticism of Various Approaches of Western Philosophy given by Levinas.

Levinas is against the western philosophical tradition. Traditionally western philosophy was divided into metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Metaphysics was regarded as the study of being, reality and ontology. Epistemology deals with the theory of knowledge and that theory of knowledge is used to know about the reality. Ethics is referred as the study of morality. Traditional metaphysics has shortcomings, because of ontology that's why Levinas deconceptualize the metaphysics against the traditional approach. Traditional metaphysics has a tendency to value identity over difference and sameness over chaos. Traditional metaphysics is marked as '*ontology*' and ontology when taken as the first philosophy refers the philosophy of power. Levinas reformulation of metaphysics insists on the priority of difference over identity. He deconstruct metaphysics ontological concept of totality. For him, metaphysics means a movement towards the invisible. He says that the other person constitutes the ethical meaning of the self existence. He claims that "*Ethics precedes metaphysics, that ethics is the true first philosophy*". Levinas claims that ethics cannot be reduced to epistemology because then ethics will become knowledge. He says that knowledge is incapable of determining worth and value, but still also knowledge although it has shortcomings, is regarded as faithful to the priority of the ethics itself. Levinas

main aim is to destroy the human belief of ontology and epistemology, and to create ethics, value and religion outside the realm of ontology and epistemology.

Levinas was critical about western philosophical traditions, because many philosophers in this tradition neglect the discussion on ethics. Western philosophical tradition forgets fundamental and primary aim of human being and describes ontology as first philosophy. He says that war destroys the peace of the people, but still also rationalism discussed by western philosophical tradition does not focus on human peace. The peace for Levinas can only be possible by providing self relation to other in terms of friend and neighbour.

He interrogates western philosophical traditions such as Plato's idealism, Cartesian subjectivity, Kant's autonomy, Hegel's absolute idealism, Husserl's intentionality and Heidegger's ontology. Levinas criticizes Plato's idealism because in case of Plato, particular arises from universal and universal is primary that's why particular is derived. Levinas is against the notion of that particular which arises from universal. Levinas was also against Socrates's view of ethics, because it is based on reason only, but for Levinas, ethics is first and then comes rationality power.

Descartes was a rationalistic philosopher and his famous statement is I think, therefore I am (known as cogito ergo sum). His philosophy is based on absolute truth and subjectivity. He gave importance to his own existence. He further says that our own existence is certain and the existence of the other is in dilemma. His main focus is on reason, self existence and subjectivity. According to him, only reason is the source of knowledge through which we know the external world. The starting point of Descartes philosophy is self, but for Levinas, self has no independent existence, and self exists for other. According to Levinas, Descartes '*Idea of the Infinite*' and '*Idea of God*', surpass the finite limits of human nature and mind. For Levinas, the '*Idea of God*' can be seen in the terms of inter human relationship.

Levinas was against the Kantian idea of autonomy, freedom and universal notion of ethics. Levinas favors heteronomy, self passivity, sincerity and separation of other. Kant's moral philosophy is based on universal principle, but for Levinas universal principle neglects the individuality. For Kant, reason is important, but for Levinas ethics is important.

Levinas was against Hegel absolute spirit which is taken in the terms of totalitarian view. Hegel philosophy is totalitarian because it aims at universality, absolute spirit and self knowledge. His philosophy overlooks other knowledge, and maintains absolute freedom and universal truth. Hegel considers ethics as always universal and says that morality main aim is self-determination and subjectivity of freedom. Levinas was against all such views. According to Levinas, ethics is not absolute and totalitarian. For Levinas, the person

is regarded as an individual, in terms of other and not as universal.

Husserl was regarded as the father of phenomenology. His phenomenological method is defined as an attempt to explain our direct experience as it is. Through this method, we can know about the pure essence of object and the world. Consciousness as intentionality is used by Husserl. It means conscious of something. Levinas provides the critique of Husserl. He says that Husserl reduces other to self, but according to Levinas, self is reduced to the other. According to Levinas, Husserl belief's in the presupposition of all things and reduces other to self. This type of reduction is not practical according to Levinas. Husserl thesis of intentionality interpretation forces Levinas to go against him. Husserl notion of transcendental ego is not possible at practical level at all. Heidegger was a radical philosopher and the "*existence of being*" is important for him. His famous notion was Dasein, which means being there and being

in the world. His being was connected with the relation of other. His being was social and dynamic. Heidegger believes in ontology. Levinas criticize Heidegger, by saying that Heidegger notion of being means power and impersonal category. In Heidegger case, being contain '*the other*', whereas for Levinas, '*the other*' contains the being. Levinas was against the immanence of being and ontology that was given by Heidegger. Being is beyond being which is regarded as ethical, according to Levinas. Heidegger ontology is regarded as the philosophy of power and for Levinas; ethics is more superior to philosophy of power. The philosophy of power is regarded as the philosophy of injustice and not justice. Levinas proposes ethics as first philosophy as an alternate way pursuing philosophy, because he questioned the very foundations of western philosophy.

Levinas Notion of 'Other' in Relation to the Ethical Notion

The concept of '*other*' is central to Levinas ethics as the first philosophy. His philosophy focuses on the human dignity and respect in terms of other. According to him, political relations are based on power and destruction. Peace cannot be found in political relations. Our ethical relation which means selfless concern for others is a way through which we acquire peace. For Levinas, '*other*' is regarded as primary and his philosophy is also regarded as '*other*' oriented. The conception of the other includes responsibility, freedom, justice, good, humanism and love in terms of ethics. Self is secondary for Levinas. The notion of '*other*' is concrete, abstract and asymmetrical. For Levinas, self relation of other is important because other is before than me and other precedes me and also self does not expect any return and does only duty.

Levinas discusses both negative and positive qualifications of other in '*Totality and Infinity*' book. '*Other*' as stronger, naked, destitute and orphan or widow are regarded as negative qualifications. '*Other*' that commands me, reveals me and addresses me is regarded as positive qualifications.

“Levinas makes a distinction between two forms of otherness i.e. autre and autrui in French. Autre means anything which is other and autrui means to refer other human being to whom I show my ethical relation. Levinas ethics is extended to non-human being also”.

According to Levinas, ‘other’ stands apart from me but self cannot stand apart from other. He focuses on the dependence of self on other. He called infinity as an act of self in which self is responsible and has obligation to other. Self relation of other is regarded as unity and plural, whereas ‘other’ is regarded as primary. Levinas has interest in ethical relation in terms to other because this relation is already inbuilt before him. For Levinas, *“The very relationship with the other is regarded as the relationship with the future”*. *“Other is always greater and always closer to God than I am”*, according to Levinas.

The ethical relation is not visible because self relation of other is invisible and relation to other is regarded as a social conversation according to Levinas. According to Levinas, self relation of other is an infinite idea whereas self relation self is a finite idea. He believes in metaphysical desire and metaphysical desire is referred as a desire is referred as a desire in which self overflows his power for the sake of others. The metaphysical desire is that desire which cannot be satisfied.

Various Ethical Issues Linked with the Conception of the Other

There are many ethical issues like good, responsibility, freedom, hospitality, justice and love which are linked with the conception of the other. Levinas doctrine of good is regarded as *“exterior”*. His good is not determined on the basis of utility. For him, good means a pure exteriority that reflected back into the totality and is also not totalized by rationality.

For Levinas, responsibility of other is a very important feature of subjectivity. The responsibility of other is before our relation. Infinite responsibility of other comes from the self relation of other. This infinite responsibility of other gives respect to all individuals, and also rejects any kind of expectations from other. For him, self is hostage of other and obsession of other is regarded as responsibility. The concept of responsibility comes from face of other. Responsibility of other is prior than self responsibility of itself.

Levinas notion of freedom means self relation of the other. He criticizes the traditional concept of freedom because reason manifests the freedom there. For him, freedom means the responsibility of other and no one can ignore that responsibility. For Levinas, justice arises only when the self is regarded as infinite responsibility to others. For him, justice does not arise from the judgment of somebody. Justice is evolved only from the self relation that is seen in terms of other. He is against the traditional moral and judicial sense of justice.

For Levinas, love means responsibility performed in terms of other. Love is without expectation and intentionality. According to Levinas, hospitality means self welcome of other and that welcome of other is without any condition, expectation and interest. It is unconditional and not reciprocal. For Levinas, religion is ethical and is not based on rational and mystical theology. He supports Judaism and is against Christianity and atheism. He regards Judaism as the source of ethics because for him, ethics considers the fundamental obligation to the other. He gave importance to humanity in terms of whole.

Positive Analysis given by Different Scholars on Levinas Ethical Notion

Levinas was regarded as very relevant, by many post- modern scholars, when they deal with the critique of modernity. According to Simon Critchley, *“Levinas expresses his thesis in only one big thing which is known as ethics as first philosophy and ethics here means a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person”*. According to Michael L. Morgan, *“Levinas takes the encounter with other person, the face- to- face, to be a dimension of all of our social existence that is hidden and needs to be disclosed”*.

According to Adrian T Peperzak, “Levinas himself has declared that he never wrote on ethics and the word ethics in ‘ethics as first philosophy’, only point to something that is more radical and original. It indicates a ‘point’, where the ethical and the theoretical cannot be opposed or distinguished a ‘point’, where the opposition between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is neither valid”. Peperzak further says that “Levinas philosophy approached us by saying that everything move towards each other and always meet to the relations that exist between the other and me”.

According to Richard A Cohen, “Levinas ethical philosophy refers to the ethical situation which means a unique relation, a relation without distance or union: the proximity of one for the other. Again Richard A. Cohen says that “Ethics for Levinas means a peculiar ethical exacerbation of language which bends the true to the good”

The Critical Study of Levinas Ethical Notion

There are many philosophers who appreciates Levinas ethical notion and as well as criticize it also. Derrida, Alain Badiou, Simone de Beauvoir, Paul Ricoeur etc. we will also discuss the limits of Levinas ethical notion.

Derrida both appreciates and criticize Levinas ethics. He appreciates Levinas for his ethics of other and criticizes Levinas, while saying that Levinas differentiates between ethics and moral. Levinas ethics is considered as *“ethics of ethics”* only, that is why it is criticized by Derrida. For Derrida, self relation of other as primary is not acceptable, but for Levinas it is acceptable. For Derrida, Levinas notion of absolute peace is impossible. Derrida says that Levinas avoids the ontological mediation of the philosophical tradition.

Derrida says that hospitality is conditional, whereas Levinas says that it is not. Neighbour is primary for Levinas, but for Derrida love of enemy is regarded as love of neighbour. Derrida says that subjectivity is found within finitude, whereas Levinas subjectivity is found within infinity. Derrida says that responsibility means the responsibility towards 'absolute singularity of other', whereas Levinas says that responsibility is regarded as responsibility of other.

Alain Badiou regards Levinas ethics as an anti-philosophy. He is against Levinas context of ethics in terms of politics. Badiou believes in evil which is considered as primary, whereas Levinas believes in good as primary. According to Badiou, Levinas was not able to prove the self with non-identification of other. According to Badiou, "Levinas has no philosophy, not even philosophy as the servant of theology. Rather, this is philosophy annulled by theology, itself no longer a theology but, precisely an ethics". "Levinas ethics is regarded as unintelligible and undesirably religious."

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the well-known feminist philosopher, Levinas notion of other as woman is not acceptable. According to Katz, Levinas notion of feminine is regarded as complex view, because it indicates a relation of both feminine and Judaic. According to Paul Ricoeur, if no self and self no response of other will be there, then how self relation of other is possible. So, the self would be unable to respond, this respond of self to other factor is missing from Levinas ethics. According to Ricoeur, happiness is not found in Levinas work, Levinas concept of other breaks the self and if the self is broken, then how it welcomes other. It has been also said that Levinas fails to distinguish the self from the 'I'.

Levinas ethics has limitations, because of the concept of ethical –political. The main question is that, why he took the help of politics, to justify his notion of ethics. Why pure ethics, without taking help of third party is not possible.

Levinas thought does not provide a pure vision of ethics or responsibility. Levinas thought cannot be used to provide an ethical ground, because his thought makes us to go back to the uncertainty of politics and responsibility. The figure of the Third in Levinas, complicates the notion of a pure ethical realm.

Cconclusion

According to me, Levinas talks about ethics, but he never had tried to make an ethical theory. His main aim is to show the ethics of other as an important feature of mankind. His ethics has moral appeal to humanity in terms of whole. His ethics has limitations also, but still it got attention from many scholars. His work has changed the direction of western philosophy in terms of generality and the direction of ethical theory in terms of particularity. His conception of other and ethics are applied in different disciplines also which are apart from philosophy discipline. His ethics goes beyond the traditional liberal and modernist theory. His concept of other is treated as unique and essential contributions to western philosophy. He considered issues of philosophy in term of ethics. His aim was to destroy human belief of ontology and epistemology and to maintain value, ethics and religion in terms of humanity.

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