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# BEYOND PROXIMITY AND SUBSTITUTION: LEVINAS ON TRANSCENDENCE

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## ABSTRACT

Martin Heidegger's philosophy is a form of an onto-theology that reduces the encounter with 'the Other' into a metaphysical abstraction. For this reason his idea of Being tends to be morally naïve and oblivious to the reality of suffering. Emmanuel Levinas develops a philosophy which challenges this where the relation between the human person and 'the Other' is asymmetrical. This not only challenges Heidegger's ontology but also rectifies the tendency toward egocentrism of Western philosophy in general. This paper argues that Levinas' idea 'the other' is a manifestation of the Divine. Levinas is saying that without this idea of the divine or God, there can be no way out of the violence in human history. The traces of the Divine can be found in the unique experiences of transcendence, such as unconditional love.

**Keywords:** Proximity; Substitution; Asymmetry; Transcendence; Ethics of Love

According to Martin Heidegger, the human being is always already a being-in-the-world.<sup>2</sup> *Dasein* always already understands itself in terms of its being. Man is thrown into the world to realize his potentiality for being. Unlike other entities, *Dasein* is a being who is concerned with its own existence.<sup>3</sup> Thrownness is that characteristic of human existence whereby man is attuned to the nature of his existence. By being predisposed into its own existence, the world is disclosed to *Dasein*. Man's potentiality for being arises by means of a state-of-mind which constitutes his openness to the world as such.

Emmanuel Levinas, whose approach to ethics is phenomenological, outlines a departure from Heideggerian ontology. Ethics, according to Levinas, is first philosophy.<sup>4</sup> This is because epistemology or metaphysics must be dependent on a foundational question.<sup>5</sup> While it can be said that metaphysics is fundamental in the history of thought and that epistemology provides the structure underlying cognitive categories, our knowledge of the world as such is insufficient in terms of understanding what comes prior to Being. For Levinas, ethics precedes all intelligibility.

Heidegger's core concern is the truth of Being. But he has no response to the violence against the Other. Being is morally naïve. Even history is indifferent to the suffering of the Other. Going beyond ontology requires the recognition of a primordial situation. Levinas says that only ethics can truly give "justification and motivation for further thought and belief."<sup>7</sup> The question of ethics points to the meaning of every face-to-face encounter. This profound meaning can only be expressed through the concept of transcendence. Transcendence, as a manifestation of the Divine, is the ability to love unconditionally.

### **Beyond Ontology: Departing from Heidegger**

Heidegger positions *Dasein* at the center in the unfolding of Being. In such a positioning, it appears obvious that there are concepts that are excluded from the eloquence and grandeur of Heidegger's exposition insofar as Being seems to make itself manifest only to those for whom the meaning of Being comes into light. "Being is the being of beings,"<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger writes in his *Being and Time*. Being, in this sense, is a universal concept that applies to the totality of beings. This totality is the world of *Dasein*. However, the meaning of Being simply escapes the idea of otherness. While Being for Heidegger is about presence and withdrawal, it is indifferent to the stranger who dwells outside.

When some stranger knocks on the door of a home, the owner of the house would not want the trouble of inviting this person inside. This instance reveals the ethical aspect of human existence. It can be said that Heidegger's ontology has that tendency to collapse everything into the truth of Being. This transforms the world of *Dasein* into some form of a totality. Totality is the way *Dasein* dominates what it means to be in the world. By implication, man is in control of the things around him. But Levinas takes a different route. He sees the affective aspect of man's being-in-the-world. As such, he proposes a counter-ontology that views Being as concrete. The world of *Dasein* for Levinas is rooted in lived experience. Heidegger, meanwhile, conceives of *Dasein* in terms of the structure of existence as a metaphysical abstraction.

Modernity teaches us that man is the source of all truth. For Levinas, this is simply the tyranny of Being. Heidegger's ontology restricts "Being" and reduces philosophy to an "I". Man as "there-being" is the sole witness to Being. Levinas thinks that we must move beyond this way of understanding finitude. The face of the Other does not encounter Being as such. Levinas says that the original relation between human beings cannot be limited to complex abstractions. Ethics must be deeply affective. Ethics for Levinas is not about rules, happiness, or utility. For him, the ethical is about what makes us human. Mortality, in this sense, is the embodiment of sentience and emotions. But the crisis that we face, Levinas writes, is "crisis of being, not because the sense of this verb might still need to be understood in its semantic secret and might call on the powers of ontology, but because I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place."<sup>9</sup>

Man must find his place in the moral universe. To be a human person is to be responsible for someone. If to exist means that *Dasein* has

the power-to-be in the world, then existence itself only pushes the other out of the same world. For the Western man, the ego-self is at the heart of everything that is. All meanings belong to this ego. The ego then will write the history of, and for all peoples. This ego is the universal truth. All human thought is about what the ego thinks. The world that appears familiar is exclusively under the magical spell of the ego. Our modern times, with its emphasis on control and manipulation, reveals that the ego is the god unto this earth. Levinas explains in *Totality and Infinity*:

For in the most general form it has assumed in the history of thought it appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us, whatever be the yet unknown lands that bound it or that it hides from view, from an ‘at home’ which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of-oneself, toward a yonder.<sup>10</sup>

For Levinas, the “I” is caught up with the familiar. The ego only knows itself and listens to no one. The outside-of-oneself, the reality of the Other, is unknown to it. For Levinas, it is the Other that addresses the “I”. The ego wants to get gratification from the Other. The ego, on its own, is wanting in purpose. The power-over-the-ego of the Other, in this way, always comes as an ethical demand. Moral power is about the courage to overcome the urge to destroy. Yet, an ethical demand never begs, but summons us to act. It is a command: “Thou shall not kill!”<sup>11</sup>

Man’s responsibility for the Other is foundational. The meaning of human subjectivity, the value of one’s freedom, is derived from the ethical relation between the “I” and the Other. The subject has no power over the sovereign Other. The reason for this is that the Other is the source of all meaning. In addition, Leovino Ma. Garcia says that “the face of the other resists any form of characterization and classification.”<sup>12</sup> The Being of being is anonymous. Experience is never an abstract thing. Ethics for Levinas refers to that infinite presence which recognizes the stranger among us. Authentic subjectivity, which is essentially linked to the ethical, implies the responsibility for the Other.

According to Garcia, the Other for Levinas is literally the stranger in the biblical sense of the poor, the widow, the orphan and foreigner.<sup>13</sup> The face of the Other imposes itself to the ego as the emergence of what is more fundamental than one's own freedom. Levinas says that "to think the infinite, the transcendent, the stranger, is hence not to think of an object."<sup>14</sup> The very wisdom of love teaches us each human person is unique. Man is irreducible to any function. In this way, the Other must be addressed more properly in terms of its freedom. By doing the good for the Other, human subjectivity will find its ultimate meaning.

### **Proximity, Substitution and Asymmetry**

Ethics concerns the relation between the "I" and the "Other". The Levinasian concepts of proximity and substitution specify two aspects of such ethical relation. It is not enough that a person places himself in the world of the Other. It is important that people are able to rise above their contingent activities in order to recognize the value of the Other. It is not enough to "think about" doing the good for other people. The rich man must get out of his car to reach out to the hungry child in the streets. The doctor must not only ask about what a dying patient feels inside. The world needs to know why it always matters to live in the first place.

The first aspect in ethical relation involves the notion of proximity. Proximity refers to the immediacy of the Other's presence. For instance, a person is associated with various things, with his environment, and with other individuals. But the relation with them often comes as artificial and inauthentic. However, the moment the state-of-mind of the same person realizes the needs of people, his contact with the Other becomes direct. A father becomes fully aware of his obligation to his children when one of them gets hurt. Parental responsibility is beyond any notion of role-playing. It is about realizing more deeply what it means to be responsible for the welfare of a human being who can only depend on a mature adult for care.

Beyond our everyday lives, we also carry within ourselves the greater burden of history. Speaking about the *Holocaust*, Elie Wiesel says: “What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled, we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depend on theirs.”<sup>15</sup> Past events remind us that the Other is not a servant, but our master. We owe our freedom to the people who have sacrificed their lives for us. As such, the Other is not inferior, but is superior to us.<sup>16</sup> The meaning of our lives depends on how we treat those who have given their lives for our freedom.

The second aspect in ethical relations concerns the idea of substitution. The Other resists any conceptualization. The Other is beyond any categorization. For Levinas, it is the self that is subjected to the world of the Other. Subjectivity in this regard means being held hostage by the world of the Other. Through substitution, the ego takes the place of the Other. The subject, in this sense, becomes that being for the Other. The self has to sacrifice its happiness for the sake of the stranger. Since the Other is suffering, any response must address such specific vulnerability. To do otherwise is nothing but hypocrisy. Any face-to-face encounter is always personal.<sup>17</sup> The person-to-person relationship means that the human subject is willing to suffer for the Other.

In the face-to-face encounter, the responsibility for the Other is never dependent upon the desires of the self. Rather, it is unconditional. To love a person truly is to love without motives. Substitution corresponds to the full recognition of the Other. Hence, “the infinite in the finite, the more in the less...is produced as desire.”<sup>18</sup> To dwell in the Other is to desire the well-being of the stranger. Levinas suggests that to be meaningfully present for the Other, the human subject’s orientation toward the Other must turn into that act of true generosity, one that is “incapable of approaching the Other with an empty hand.”<sup>19</sup>

Levinas says that “the responsibility for the Other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, it is a responsibility that is prior to every memory.<sup>21</sup> Responsibility, in this sense, only comes

through the Other. Beyond the illusions of the ego-self, what remains is the imperative that the subject must exist for the Other. Levinas exclaims that this responsibility is “prior to any dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers...”<sup>22</sup> The moral responsibility for the Other supersedes the very freedom of the human subject. The Other is prior to everything. For Levinas, since the ego is accountable for what the Other suffers from, its primary duty is to acknowledge its guilt.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, what is problematic is the inability of the self to rise above its narrow vision. For Levinas, there are people who are overly glorified by the whims of their egos, with themselves and the systems they organize around them.<sup>24</sup> The reality is that the ego shows no real affection toward the Other. The ego has no meaningful encounter with the face. Any encounter is purely conceptual. The Other is treated as a useful specimen. This happens when students are sent into immersions only to realize that they are fortunate compared to others. Proximity is different. It puts the human subject inside the world of the Other. Beyond the cold, naïve, and impersonal Being, every face-to-face encounter brings into the human subject’s awareness an inescapable moral obligation.

For Levinas, ethics is the ethics of pure self-sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore non-reciprocal. As a natural course of things, people will insist that the value of a relationship should arise from the fact that there is mutual benefit. The problem with reciprocity is that it actually fails to grasp the meaning of the freedom of the Other. It naturally mistakes the same as one of its own. For this reason, the ego wants to be recognized for its efforts and its work valued through gratitude. But such kind of act is a result of the ego’s urge to control the relationships that revolve around it. The subject must protect its own interest before it can decide to be a friend. Such a communion requires a mutual exchange of gifts. But if the subject is too concerned about its own well-being, then how can it truly love?

To understand asymmetry, we need to emphasize the vulnerability of the Other. The Other is helpless. To expect something in return before one acts, thus, is nothing short of being selfish. Events such as those in

Syria and Myanmar bespeak of the reality of death which shows forth the vulnerability of the Other. The subject, by thinking only of its freedom, pushes the Other into the brink of extinction. A tyrannical state condemns innocent people as its enemy. The Other, in this way, becomes vulnerable to violence. This must compel the world, from a moral end, to change its own selfish ways. Wiesel expresses the same thought when he says that “our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.”<sup>26</sup>

The Other is not a property of the subject. The ego has no right to dictate on what is to become of the Other. The ego cannot reduce the Other into an object.<sup>27</sup> Love, as such, liberates instead of dictate. Love frees the Other from the hold of the ego. It perpetuates the freedom of the Other. Still, the self remains allergic to the reality of the Other.<sup>28</sup> This allergy flows from the schematization of things that society imposes. Such points to the “we/they”, “me/you,” and the “us/them” distinction. The Other is perceived as a threat to the ego’s wonderful existence. The face of a stranger is something that threatens the subject. Yet, the face for Levinas is actually an epiphany. It is a metaphor for what has become of the stranger. It is the face of the weary orphan, the innocent who are victims of violent extremism, the stateless migrant refugees who deserve humane treatment. The Other, Garcia says, reveals itself as a form of “resistance of what has no resistance – the ethical resistance.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Violence and the Ontology of Power**

It is suggested that Levinas speaks of violence because he belonged to that dark epoch in human history in which totalitarian regimes persecuted millions. Levinas saw violence as a focal point of his critical thought.<sup>30</sup> For Levinas, “violence is a condition for totality and a negation of infinity.”<sup>31</sup> Violence is the negation of man’s responsibility. War imperils human possibilities by absolutizing the meaning of history. History forces human beings into submission. The concept of false nationalism, the “us against them” logic, has been employed to justify destruction and the rampant violation of human dignity. Violence, in point of fact, is meant

to erase the freedoms of decent human beings.

Levinas witnessed the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Hitler sought to efface the identity of the German people by saying that the state is all. By consolidating power in his hands, Hitler simply put everything at his disposal. To possess total control, he knew that he had to be worshipped like a god. Nazi propaganda realized for Hitler his ambitions. Joseph Goebbels was the main architect in misleading the public. His fanatical distortion of reality meant that Hitler was the lord of everything. Hitler's maniacal desire for power and total control was realized by means of the state machinery and the countless lies to the German people.

History reminds us how ruthless despots demeaned humanity, stripping the moral worth of all those who do not conform to their definition of man. Tyrants use hate in order to destroy the weak. For Levinas, "Nazi murder was annihilation for the sake of annihilation, murder for the sake of murder, evil for the sake of evil."<sup>32</sup> As a consequence of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, a new term had been introduced at the Nuremberg Trials to capture the magnitude of their monstrosity – *Crimes Against Humanity*. The murder of innocent lives was a result of racial bias. Nazi ideology dictated what the truth should be at the expense of the lives of six million Jews.

Heidegger had no explanation for Nazism. His ontology simply bypassed ethics. Violence is manifest in the ontology of power. The ego becomes everything. The weak is excluded from human society as the latter succumbs to the madness and delusion of the powerful. The ego-self perpetrates the injustices against the powerless – the orphan, the homeless, the sick. The Other is conquered in ways that desecrate the humanity of the face. The Other is reduced into an entity that is distant, unknown, and alienated from the world. The Other wanders nowhere. The Other is cursed by a world that is indifferent. The Other struggles and is loved by nobody. The Other, in this respect, finds the consummation of its existence only in death. Salomon Terreblanche, "the question of the possibility of salvation within history becomes a question of how the

individual subject comes to meet its own death.”<sup>33</sup>

Heidegger’s prominent ties to the Nazis was something that Levinas found disturbing. Heidegger’s indifference to the suffering of the Jews had reduced him into someone who was morally suspect. Heidegger had defended himself by saying that there was no way to overcome his predicament under Nazi rule, that he only acted based upon the demands of the situation he was put into as rector at Freiburg. Levinas regretted his initial affinity to Heidegger. But in his writings, Levinas pursued hope and love for humanity instead of hatred. Terreblanche expounds, “what contributes to Levinas’ unique place within the landscape of contemporary humanist and moral philosophy is that in spite of his gloomy account of the indifference of history (and the violence of being), the thought of human dignity does not succumb in the face of the indifference of history.”<sup>34</sup>

Moral indifference has severe implications. When a man has the power to prevent a moral wrong and yet refuses to act with a sense of urgency, he is more culpable than the individuals who had inflicted harm on their hapless victims. By not doing enough, human society contributes to all the oppression suffered by the Syrian people and the Rohingya in Myanmar. The world is just watching while people are dying. What is to become of the meaning of humanity, for Levinas, depends on how the subject values its encounter with the Other. The Other is utterly defenseless. The difficult situation that millions of helpless human beings have been forced into determines the way the human subject must view its own freedom. Levinas explains:

To have to answer for one’s right to be, not in relation to the abstraction of some anonymous law, some legal entity, but in fear for the other. My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun,’ my home - have they not been the usurpation of places belonging to others already oppressed by me or starved, expelled to a Third World: rejecting, excluding, exiling, despoiling, killing.<sup>35</sup>

Levinas is suspicious of the idea of justice. No amount of human justice, by any form, is enough to repair a totally broken world. For Levinas, man must be wary of the impersonal character of justice.<sup>36</sup> Justice in the world depends on rectifying a moral wrong by improving the future. However, the wounds of the past do not really heal when it is the affluent, the intelligent, and the powerful who will ultimately decide how to define what is just. The past is something that can be easily forgotten because justice is also dictated by those who abused humanity in the first place. History is interpreted by hypocrites and bigots. As such, the poor man out there is still voiceless. Justice has become nothing but the excuse of a majority that controls every aspect of politics and public life.

### **Religion and History**

For Levinas, the face of the Other is the trace of the Divine. The encounter with the Other, hence, is a transcendental encounter. The reality of God is made manifest in the human person's infinite responsibility for the Other.<sup>37</sup> Levinas thinks that "the invisible must manifest itself if history is to lose the last word."<sup>38</sup> According to Ryan Urbano, God for Levinas is not an object in man's consciousness.<sup>39</sup> To think of God as an object, for instance, only results to some form of idol worship. Levinas is critical of such because it is tantamount to making the believer succumb to a kind of a magical power.<sup>40</sup> Urbano says that worshipping God as a sacred object undermines the transcendence of the Divine.<sup>41</sup>

The mystical is a passive concept that is not in contact with the reality of man. Religion, in this way, alienates man from the meaning of his infinite responsibility. This is the case because the language of religion sometimes deceives. The Divine is reduced into what is adequate to the ego. The language for such deception is religious hypocrisy. Rich people donate money to build churches, but they have nothing to give to hungry children and the homeless. The wealthy seeks salvation for their broken souls through their monetary contributions, but they refuse to give bread to the needy. Religion has become the refuge of the morally corrupt who are using God to vindicate themselves. God becomes, in this sense, a tool

at the disposal of those who willingly demean and undermine the dignity of the poor and downtrodden. The ontology of power clearly infects religion in various ways. Urbano explicates:

Levinas considers religion that promotes the sacred to be a form of idolatry because God is replaced with a sacred object. Moreover, he rejects rational theology because it thematizes God and reduces him to a mere concept. For Levinas, rational theology is a manifestation of the philosophy of the same which dissolves transcendence into immanence.<sup>42</sup>

People worship their idols, all carved out from their insecure egos. Such type of ‘religious’ act is a latent form of totalization that seeks to control the minds of believers, their attitudes, and convictions. Immanence transforms the idea of God into something that is material in expression. But the point is not to think of God as some kind of a sacred object that humans must worship. The meaning of the Divine is infinite. For Levinas, the Divine makes itself manifest in time. To find God, humans must act in ways that reveal the traces of the infinite in our time. Terreblanche explains that “for Levinas, time itself constitutes the relationship with the infinite.”<sup>43</sup> The God of history is the same God who accompanies man in his daily struggles.

History for Levinas, according to Terreblanche, belongs to the layer of the “there is”.<sup>44</sup> The “there is,” he further explains, refers to a “primordial and fundamental layer of Being, which precedes Being as light and intelligibility.”<sup>45</sup> For Levinas, history brings about something fatal to human existence.<sup>46</sup> As such, it is only when man realizes the ethical, the face-to-face encounter, that he is emancipated from the impersonal nature of Being as such. For Levinas, to approach the Other is to be “uprooted from history.”<sup>47</sup> Levinas saw no difference between history and the wars that ravaged humanity. This interpretation of history helps explain the manner by which man understands the meaning of his finitude given the reality of hegemony and exclusion in the world today.

Despite the progress of human civilization, there are individuals who still seek to impose their prejudices and dangerous views. Religion is used to justify killing people. An ideology is imprinted in the hearts of young men. Terror in the name of religion is employed to target and harm innocent civilian lives. Today, the random nature of terrorism means that it does not give value to the lives of people. According to Michael Walzer, terrorists and terror groups “devalue not only the individuals they kill but also the group to which the individuals belong.”<sup>48</sup> Hence, violence becomes an evil instrument to subjugate, and at the same time, disrupt the normal way of life of well-meaning people.

Terrorism has nothing to do with religion. Terror is simply evil men using evil against the innocent. Religion for Levinas, in the substantive sense of the word, points to a higher plane, that of equality and fraternity.<sup>49</sup> Extremism, in fact, runs counter to the good values that religion tries to bring to human history. The critique on religion of Levinas, in this respect, is not a critique against religion *per se*, but the way religion is wrongly practiced. In the same manner, the use of the Divine by radicals in pursuit of their evil agenda is a distortion and a misappropriation of the name of God. Terrorists protest against the hegemony of Western values, but they do so at the expense of the lives of many innocent people, including young unsuspecting individuals who their leaders force to wear suicide vests through dogma.

Levinas views history as something indifferent.<sup>50</sup> Just like the reality of terror, history is just as naïve to the sufferings of the innocent. For Levinas, history is that thing in which Being makes itself manifest as war. In war, in the same way as terrorism, human beings are subjugated, reduced as pawns by all the powers who dictate what is to become of our world and the lives of people. Historical totality for Levinas, like terrorism, is nothing but an attempt to annihilate the Other. History, Terreblanche explains, is something that Levinas finds indifferent, driving human beings into their meaningless deaths.<sup>51</sup>

## **Transcendence as Unconditional Love**

The only real salvation in this world is love. For Levinas, transcendence defines the lived encounter with the Other. Beyond ontology, it refers to acts of heroism that emancipate the Other from its suffering. It leaves no records or trace in our history books. It is not documented nor told in myths. Love, indeed, need not be announced to the world. Love is simply love, done for the sake of the other. Self-sacrifice, in this sense, is the fulfillment of man's infinite responsibility. It is all about being there where one is needed. Love can only be the proper response to all the wars and violence in this world. Love, in the end, makes all hope in this life possible.

In the midst of the terror of our mortal existence, the poor can only pray for compassion. Compassion is the recognition that the subject too suffers with the Other. But compassion is not love. Love cannot really be rooted in a negative sentiment. To love is to acknowledge that the Other is the ultimate source of meaning in human life. Milan Kundera is right, "to love someone out of compassion is not love."<sup>52</sup> Beyond that feeling of wanting to commiserate with someone, love is the joyful realization of the meaning of one's duty. Loving the Other is never optional. It is a moral necessity, irreducible, and complete.

Only love has the power over everything. Love is without end. It is the essence of being human. To exist means to be at war with one's ego. Love, in this respect, must be more than the utterance of words. Words have the power to move mountains. But it is love that accomplishes the things that make life truly worth living. When a human person loves, he will tear walls down and break all barriers to realize the good for the Other. The struggle for existence is man's own making. The wisdom of love is man's only means to escape the tyranny of his own ego. Levinas elucidates: "The love of one's fellowman, and his original right, as unique and incomparable, for which I am answerable, tend of their own accord to make appeal to reason capable of comparing incomparables, a wisdom of love."<sup>53</sup>

Thus, according to Terreblanche, “the totality of history shows itself as indifferent to this separated existence of the individual, wherein, also, the human dignity of the subject resides, and it threatens to swallow its separateness and place it under erasure.”<sup>54</sup> The asymmetrical meaning of ethical responsibility points to the fact that love is unconditional. If the transcendent aspect of ethical relationships is about the Divine making its presence manifest in the acts of persons, then by all means, such a trace can only be pure and not tainted with selfish motives or pretensions. To value the life of a precious human being is to care for this individual tirelessly.

Nothing can replace the unique opportunity to love in an unquestioning way. Love is the greatest expression of our humanity. There is always a peculiar moment that one experiences in loving the Other. Caring for someone requires more than a mere desire. It is about the movement of the Divine within us. Each minute that a father spends with a child is a realization that doing something for another human being requires moral courage. Persistence is important. To love is to find what is most meaningful in life. True love is lasting since one develops an eternal bond that essentially says how one must think and act as a human being. It is the Other, in this regard, that helps determine the meaning of one’s moral existence.

Thomas Tatransky thinks that being responsible for the Other is also a way of caring for the self.<sup>55</sup> Friendship expands human freedom in a mutual way. The gift one offers to the Other is a good that one gives to the self. However, moral responsibility for Levinas is about the self’s infinite presence that one cannot expect in a mutual relationship. The meaning of this presence, Levinas thinks, “does not fade away into words, get lost in technical questions, freeze up into institutions or structures. The presence of persons in the full force of their irreplaceable identity, in the full force of their inevitable responsibility.”<sup>56</sup> Love, in this regard, is that continuous and active expression of the moral good. Tatransky is simply mistaken in reinterpreting Levinas. Since the advent of modernity, it is the ego that has defined what is to become of this world. It cannot be called true love if the self will require the Other to accept, promote, and

recognize the former, which in the actuality of things, has always decided the purpose of every exchange and the value of every relationship under its own terms.

Finally, death is a part of life. What defines the meaning of human life for Heidegger is the fact that man is a being-towards-death. Accepting the impending impossibility of the human being means that, for Heidegger, life is only able to find its eventual completeness in death. But Heidegger's exposition of the issue of mortality is also incarcerated in his abstractive ontology, one that has been used to justify the senselessness of any war. But death, in truth, always comes as an ethical issue. In man's search for meaning, life as it is may be absurd, but such judgment is only a result of the inability of the ego to overcome its own excesses. In the end, only love can determine the ultimate meaning of human existence.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is an investigation into Levinasian ethics. Ethical responsibility bespeaks of the traces of the Divine. The face of the Other is something that is irreducible to what is objective. For this reason, moral responsibility serves a dual purpose: it summons the self, and at the same time, commands it. Heidegger's analysis of Being is nothing but the imprisonment of man in an ontology and the subjugation of the Other in history. History, like Being, is morally indifferent to the Other. Proximity and substitution reveal that the person for Levinas must come into contact with and put himself in the place of the Other. Ethical responsibility is asymmetrical. Love does not require reciprocity. Love is sacrifice. It demands nothing from the Other whose vulnerability compels the subject to act. But while ethical responsibility always comes through the Other, it is transcendence that concretizes every ethical relation. The ultimate meaning of transcendence is love.

This essay has tried to correct the impression that Levinasian ethics can be reinterpreted so that the responsibility for the Other might come to also mean as a creative caring of the self. To commit oneself to the care of the Other, the idea of reciprocity connotes, also fashions

something good for the human subject. But this is a misunderstanding precisely because in the first place, Levinas intended to show that the Other is suffering. The Other refers to helpless human beings who have been subjugated by those who are in positions of power. The ethics of the face, in this regard, is not concerned about mutual exchanges. It is rooted in the urgency of emancipating the destitute, the marginalized, and the weak from the fetters of unfreedom. The love for the Other is man's pure sacrifice. The meaning of one's life can only be found when one chooses to endure, beyond question, any suffering out of love. It is about doing the good for the Other, despite all, and without condition.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press), 124.

<sup>3</sup> *Dasein* for Heidegger, means "there-being." The "Da" means "there" and "sein" means "being." See *Ibid*, 128

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. "Ethics as First Philosophy." In *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. By Sean Hand. (Oxford: Blackwell: 1989), 75.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Dahnke. "Book Review: Ethics as First Philosophy." In *Auslegung*. Volume 24, Volume 2 (2001): 199.

<sup>6</sup> Dahnke, "Ethics as First Philosophy, 212

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 84.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. By Alphonso Lingis. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 33.

<sup>10</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Leovino Garcia, "The Infinite Responsibility to the Other." In *Philosophy of the Human Person*. (Davao City: Ateneo de Davao University Research and Publication Office, 1996), 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*, 49.

- <sup>14</sup> Elie Wiesel. "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech." In *Night*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 120.
- <sup>15</sup> Garcia, "The Infinite Responsibility to the Other," 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. By Alphonso Lingis. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 10.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.
- <sup>24</sup> Thomas Tatransky, "A Reciprocal Asymmetry? Levinas' Ethics Reconsidered." In *Ethical Perspectives*, Volume 15, Number 3 (2008): 296.
- <sup>25</sup> Wiesel, "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," 120.
- <sup>26</sup> Eduardo Calasanz, "Ethics with a Human Face." In *Commentaries on Moral Philosophy* (Manila: Philippine Commission on Higher Education, 1998), 167.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 167
- <sup>28</sup> Garcia, "The Infinite Responsibility to the Other," 11; Also see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.
- <sup>29</sup> Fleurdeliz Altez, "Banal and Implied Forms of Violence in Levinas' Phenomenological Ethics." In *Kritike*, Volume 1, Number 1 (2007): 52.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.
- <sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*. Edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood. (London: Routledge, 1998), 65.
- <sup>32</sup> Salomon Terreblanche, "On History and Salvation in Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch." In *Theological Studies*, Volume 64, Number 2 (2008): 887.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 885.
- <sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*. (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 23.
- <sup>35</sup> Terreblanche, "On History and Salvation in Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch," 903.
- <sup>36</sup> Ryan Urbano, "Approaching the Divine: Levinas on God, Religion, Idolatry and Atheism." In *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*. Volume 15, Number 1 (2012): 50.
- <sup>37</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 243; as quoted in Terreblanche, "On History and Salvation in Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch," 903.
- <sup>38</sup> Urbano, "Approaching the Divine: Levinas on God, Religion, Idolatry and Atheism," 51.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid
- <sup>42</sup> Terreblanche, “On History and Salvation in Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch,” 895.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 886.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 895.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 886.
- <sup>46</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52; as cited in Terreblanche, On History and Salvation in Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch,” 886.
- <sup>47</sup> Michael Walzer, “Terrorism and Justice War.” In *Philosophia: Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 34 (2006): p.5.
- <sup>48</sup> Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 85.
- <sup>49</sup> Terreblanche, “On History and Salvation in Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch,” p.887.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 19-20.
- <sup>52</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Martin Heidegger and Ontology.” In *Diacritics* Volume 26, Number 1 (1996): 186.
- <sup>53</sup> Terreblanche, “On History and Salvation in Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch,” .888.
- <sup>54</sup> Tatransky, “A Reciprocal Asymmetry? Levinas’ Ethics Reconsidered,” 303.
- <sup>55</sup> Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 87.
- <sup>56</sup> Tatransky, “A Reciprocal Asymmetry? Levinas’ Ethics Reconsidered,” 305.

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