

Response to Tatsuya Ishizaki's Paper

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I want to begin by thanking my colleague Tatsuya Ishizaki for his paper which now offers me an opportunity to address two or three themes linked to my own research. Tatsuya's paper has among other things directed our attention to a particular viewpoint that identifies limits to language when used to address a notion of being beyond the self. Tatsuya weaves together elements from the works of Wittgenstein, from Paul Standish and from Emmanuel Levinas as part of his exploration, far beyond the scope of my own research. So I will beg your indulgence and offer a reply to Tatsuya based in my own understanding of Levinas, his philosophy of ethics centered in this idea of being beyond the self and the part that language plays in achieving that ethical stance in the world including something on the issue of transcendence.

If I start by looking at this idea of being beyond the self and its centering by Levinas in an absolutely necessary relationship with the other that he describes as ethical. I might underline the importance that Levinas attaches to this relationship by using his own descriptor of ethics as first philosophy. First and before all other modes of understanding of being beyond the self. The only means by which an autonomous human being can journey beyond the self through a relationship with the other.

I won't expand much further on that interpretation here. An expansion as such would be a paper in itself. What I will say is that Levinas' treatment of philosophy as ontology from Plato through Descartes to Heidegger is not dismissive of all that these philosophers have to say on the subject of being but to my mind is a detailed and thorough search for the ethical account of the other within their works. From which he concludes that even where there may be traces of the consideration of alterity, the strength of an historical appeal to totalising ontology and inescapable subjectivity results in each case in the exclusion, dismissal or even overpowering of the other.

How then does Levinas suppose that we might escape this overpowerment?

Levinas sites the ethical relation with the other (I reiterate to his mind the only mode or means of being beyond the self), in language. Is language our escape? What if language naturally brings with its use some limits in communication, in understanding, in transmission? What are these limits and where and how do they occur? How, given these circumstances can the ethical relationship seemingly centered in language be achieved?

Let us take two situations where language is used and where we may at first glance find little hint of overpowerment, where we may gain instead a degree of comfort in the consideration of one human being for another perhaps in a rather idealised description of the act and circumstance of communication. The first might occur between teacher and pupil while the second revolves

around individuals coming together from across the world. In the first instance we may assume that knowledge safely built on an historical understanding of facts, if not a conceptual account of that understanding at least uses a shared language. We may also consider that the role of the teacher itself lends additional authority to that which is spoken while the willing student remains open to and engaged in that learning.

In the second example we may assume that while a first greeting between individuals who meet as strangers may test the limits of confidence in each, (the transmission of a conceptual understanding seemingly beyond possibility at that moment), an eventual degree of understanding may be achievable with goodwill and effort in the longer term.

To Levinas, both interpretations are open to question. Not through the limits of language but by the fact that they are once again centered in an historical appeal to a totalising interpretation of knowledge on the one hand and an inescapable subjectivity on the other. Each, without intent resulting in the exclusion, dismissal or even overpowering absorption of the other who is stranger and separate and ever remains so. How then would the detail of Levinas's interpretation vary from those above and what part would a different interpretation of language play in ensuring the survival of an ethical relation with the other?

In relation to the teacher, if we take a totalising view of knowledge that we have already identified might share a common language, Levinas is clear. Cognition and reason can act to neutralise the other, become a theme, an object, a concept, all measured against a horizon which itself is a limit (separate from language). While he acknowledges that this is how knowledge 'plays out' in the world he asks what harm is imposed by this boundary, this conceptual horizon when it excludes the other and what imposition does it necessarily place on the recognition of knowledge itself including our attempts to consider being beyond ourselves.

To Levinas teaching is a conversation with the other which 'overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it'. It, (that is teaching) 'comes from the exterior', bringing me in my role as teacher 'more that I contain'. It is this calling into question by the presence of the other that is ethics. If I comprehend then alterity vanishes. I can view knowledge as a relation where 'the knowing being manifests itself' and thereby deadens my encounter with the other or I can see a relationship begun in language as 'primordially acted as a conversation' where the 'I' leaves itself.

To do this then I must accept that this conversation, this discourse will not be an 'unfolding of a prefabricated internal logic but the constitution of truth in struggle—with all the risks that freedom implies. The very strangeness of those speaking brings forward the possibility of a revelation of the other to me. Language in this sense is used when 'community' is wanting. Where the 'common plane is yet to be constituted'.

Our second example now somehow falls into place. We may choose to consider ourselves already on a plane with boundaries that even if not yet visible may become so when a light is shone. And is there not a very human drive in situations of good will, myself and the other on a single plane in a relationship established through language, to make a serious effort to comprehend? Where we both may choose to call upon accepted interpretations as played out in history to establish common ground? Is this not evidence of a pre-established relationship that we cannot escape?

To Levinas, this is again both false and excluding of the other because it comes from a central

acceptance that we exist as part of an subjective totality where discoveries await their own revealing and where each of us is interpretable by the other. Rather instead let us breach that totality in language that allows a relationship 'such that the other remains transcendent to the same'.

And here we come to the issue of transcendence in Levinas. Does he use this as a familiar phenomenological term or is his use both exclusive and an example of an effort to overcome the limits of language when used to address a notion of being beyond the self? I would say yes. Yes, in terms of the constant struggle that Levinas faces in his writings, where he necessarily has to make strenuous efforts to remain disengaged from a totalising, subjective stance while presenting his carefully thought through thoughts (in this sense how can he avoid the said?). It is as part of these struggles that words like transcendence are used, in this case to denote a 'distance in depth' which he hopes is 'irreducible to the distance the synthetic activity of the understanding establishes between terms', thus escaping totalisation. But more than that, beyond his struggles with conveying conceptual thought, Levinas sites the ethical relationship with the other in language as it is spoken. Where the unpredictability of conversation can breach the subjective totality and where the presence of the other calls into question my own spontaneity—and this is that which Levinas calls ethics.

REFERENCE

Levinas, E. (1961) *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, A. Lingis (trans.) [1969], 12th Edition [1996] (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press).