

Levinas' Ethics: Between the "Face" and Metaphysics

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The following is a brief introduction to my book, *Levinas' Ethics: Between the "Face" and Metaphysics*,⁽¹⁾ which I wrote a few years ago. I cannot cover the whole book, so I will present some of the theses of my book. To begin with, I will explain briefly several important concepts of Levinas' ethics and then I will present three main theses of my book.

Explanation of Levinas' Main Concepts

In Levinas' ethics, the most important concept is the "face" ("visage"). I think that the "face" means, not as Levinas' definition but as a fact, the experience in which I am aware of my responsibility towards the person in my presence. This experience has undoubtedly a great importance in ethics. It is the intuitional basis of our moral consciousness. Without it, humans would not realize the justice of morals as a system of norms, nor obey morals. Levinas declares that he takes the phenomenological viewpoint, so, it is natural that he begins with the study of a fact such as the "face" and sets aside the study of moral norms or their justification.

According to Levinas, I have infinite responsibility when I experience the face. That is to say, my responsibility towards the other is infinite and the more I fulfil my responsibility, the more my responsibility increases to the extent that it is possible that my responsibility is to die as a substitute for the other. However not everyone is conscious of such severe responsibility. My responsibility towards the other becomes clear to myself in proportion to the strength of my sense of responsibility.

"Infinite responsibility" implies that I have an ethically asymmetrical relation with the other. That is to say, I have, according to Levinas, a heightened responsibility towards the other, while the other has no responsibility towards me. Why are we ethically asymmetrical, though we are equally human beings? Levinas answers, "Because I am exceptionally selected to bear the asymmetrical responsibility towards the other".

But why am I selected? Objectively speaking, there is no good reason to select me between the two of us. So no one can prove the fact of my selection on objective grounds. Only the face teaches me the fact of my selection.

⁽¹⁾ *Levinas' Ethics: Between the "Face" and Metaphysics* (Japanese), Tokyo, Keiso, 2000.

Consequently, I cannot dispel the doubt that the asymmetry taught by the face is only my subjective belief and not a fact. This is, I think, a stumbling block to understanding Levinas.

Furthermore Levinas regards the other as "the absolute Other", that I cannot, as it were, "assimilate". Starting from such an understanding of the other, he constructs a formal and abstract theory by means of two concepts "the Same" and "the Other". He calls the theory "metaphysics". On the other hand, he, as a phenomenologist, also gives phenomenological descriptions. However from my point of view, his phenomenological descriptions do not form a good foundation for his "metaphysical" theory, and I see some discrepancies among them. In my book, on account of the discrepancies, I tried to evaluate his metaphysics by paying attention to its correspondence with facts.

The First Thesis

Levinas insists that the other is an absolute other. In his first main work, *Totality and Infinity*⁽²⁾, he criticises Husserl and Heidegger, claiming that they missed the absolute otherness of the other. Derrida views Levinas' criticism as superficial.⁽³⁾ Nevertheless one can justify Levinas' criticism of them, if one examines his argument carefully. This is my first thesis.

The concept of the "Other" is opposite to the concept of the "Same", i.e. the egoistic inclination. Things are certainly "Other", because they are not me. But one can submit them to the inclination of the "Same" and assimilate them (Levinas calls the assimilated things the "Same", too.). So, one cannot call them the "absolute Other". Consequently the "absolute Other" is "metaphysically" speaking, what always resists the inclination of the "Same" and can never be assimilated. Which phenomenon does the "absolute Other" correspond to? The following four points constitute the characteristic features of it.

- (1) It is unjust to consider the "absolute Other" as a Noema.
- (2) It is unjust to consider it as a product of the *Sinngebung*.
- (3) It is unjust to consider it as an object of cognition (*connaissance*), namely understanding by means of general concepts. (We will not examine (3), because it does not have any close relation to Levinas' criticism of Husserl and Heidegger.)
- (4) It is unjust to study the "absolute Other" from the ontological viewpoint that calls itself first philosophy.

(1) and (2) are criticisms of Husserl, and (4) is a criticism of Heidegger.

These criticisms deny the universality of their theories, and claim that their

⁽²⁾ *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961.

⁽³⁾ *Violence et métaphysique*, in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967.

theories do not apply to the other. But Derrida points out⁽⁴⁾ that Levinas makes an exception of the other on the ground of his misunderstanding of Husserl and Heidegger. Derrida would be just, if we could, like Husserl and Heidegger, see the other as Noema or a being that is equal to other Noemata or other beings. But we can find the rationality that supports (1),(2),(4) and proves the exceptionality of the other, if we study Levinas' complicated argument. We find the reason in his description of "teaching (enseignement)".

"Teaching" means that a teacher teaches me, as a pupil, something unknown. As a result of "teaching", I am now a member of a society or a culture. Yet, in my opinion, contrary to common sense, the reception of the "teaching" is not without criticism. I will examine "teaching" in a typical case, where an adult teaches a child. Although it is difficult for a child to criticise the teaching for intellectual reasons, nevertheless he/she does not receive all teachings equally. He/She is often afraid of strangers and gives no ear to them. On the other hand he/she will receive the teaching from an adult, if he/she is intimate with the adult and trusts him/her. After all, I think it is not by the contents of the teaching, but by the person who teaches, that he/she judges whether or not to receive the teaching. If the adult who teaches him/her is trustworthy, he/she will feel the "face" in front of the adult and respect him/her. As a result he/she will receive the teachings. The ethical motive leads this process.

Of course all sciences presuppose such "teaching". It would be impossible to examine critically a part of our knowledge without the enormous body of knowledge that we have been taught but not yet examined critically. In order to acquire the objective view that is indispensable to all sciences, we must change our attitude. That is to say, we must reject the egoistic view stemming from the inclination of the "Same" by reason of its subjectiveness, and receive an intersubjective understanding of the world that the other teaches, regarding it as truth. This change of my attitude is motivated by my obedience to the other that comes from my respect for him/her.

Supposing that the "teaching" is necessary as a presupposition of all sciences, and that the face is necessary as a presupposition of the "teaching", naturally the other who appears with dignity in the experience of the face is a presupposition of all sciences. But Husserl and Heidegger take the other who is a presupposition of all sciences for only such a being that is equal to other beings and can be subject to phenomenological reduction. However I can criticise Husserl as follows. If it were, as Husserl claims, by my *Sinnggebung* and not by himself/herself that the other exists in the "life-world" and is with dignity, I would neither respect the other nor receive his/her teaching. It is by himself/herself that he/she gains

⁽⁴⁾ *Op.cit.*

dignity. If he/she is subjected to the reduction, his/her capability as a teacher is denied and so the presupposition for all sciences is also denied. We can also criticise Heidegger. It is unjust that one considers the other as a mere being, even if one considers him/her, for example, as "a being by which I feel the face". Making me feel the face is not the (way of) being of the other (in general), because I do not feel the face in all of the others. Moreover Heidegger claims that ontology has priority over all other sciences. But this claim is contradictory to the fact that the face is the presupposition for all sciences, for ethics is, as Levinas thinks, first philosophy because of this fact. (Even if one grants the character, making me feel the face, not to the being of the other in general, but to the being of this other, one will find the same difficulty. Insisting on ontology as first philosophy, one could not overcome the difficulty.)

After all, Levinas' criticism of Husserl and Heidegger is, in my opinion, supportable, while it is not too much to say that Derrida's criticism of Levinas is superficial. But I think that another question remains untouched in Levinas' argument. Certainly the other's appearance with dignity is the presupposition for receiving the teaching. However is this dignity the same dignity as the face claims? I do not think that an extremity such as "infinite responsibility" is necessary for "teaching". Experience shows that such is not the case. In the end, Levinas intends to prove that the "face" is the presupposition for the sciences. However he succeeds only in proving that ethical relations with the other, all of which are not grounded on the face, is the presupposition.

The Second Thesis

The second thesis is the thesis about "obsession" in Levinas' second main work, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*⁽⁵⁾ (we call it briefly *Otherwise Than Being*).

In the paper we mentioned above, Derrida makes another criticism. He says there that to represent the "absolute Other" by words injures the otherness of the "absolute Other". Levinas takes this criticism seriously. So, in *Otherwise Than Being* he improves his methodological consideration in order to react to the criticism. For the improvement he intends to regard the other as the "absolute Other" more thoroughly and less compromisingly than he did in his first main work. His intention is embodied in metaphysics thoroughly developed in *Otherwise Than Being*. He says, it is without activity at all and wholly "passively" that I receive the face. According to him, in the experience of the face I do not judge freely

⁽⁵⁾ *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1974.

that I must help the other. We will take the case of "substitution" as an example. At the end of the increase of the infinite responsibility, it is possible that my responsibility is to die as a substitute for another. I find a person caught in a fire, and rush into the fire at the risk of my life. In this case, certainly I may rush into the fire not because I decide freely to substitute myself for him/her, but because I cannot bear the unsupportably painful feeling in my heart, seeing a man who is about to be burned. In this case I am "obsessed". Levinas borrows the word "obsession" from psychiatry. Originally "obsession" means for example that a patient cannot help washing his/her hands even if his/her hands are thoroughly clean. The patient himself/herself thinks it irrational. But carried away by impulse, he/she is compelled wholly passively to wash his/her hands, not motivated by a rational decision. Rushing into a fire, I may also be carried away by impulse, knowing the conduct as absurd and irrational. On the other hand, I would be behaving actively, if I rushed into a fire with conviction as a result of a moral judgement. According to Levinas, if I have active relations with the "Other", however little they may be, the "Other" will compromise with the "Same", and the latter will assimilate the former. In order to secure the absolute otherness for the "Other", Levinas proposes the concept of "obsession", which means my relation to the other without my activity.

By eliminating the free rational decision, even my free decision (such as "I choose the deed because it is morally right") is eliminated. If the deed is decided without freedom and rationality, how is it different from the obsessional one of psychiatry? Since we cannot use the moral criterion (the one for judging whether something is right or wrong) except the "face", we must not judge by another moral criterion, so to speak "after the fact", that the deed obsessed by "moral" obsession is right. Then why can we call the deed moral? Similarly why can we call the "moral" obsession, that forces the deed, moral? From my viewpoint, the only possible reason for calling them so is that they are moral as far as they form, Levinas thinks, the foundation of common morals (according to which the other and I are morally symmetrical).

Levinas himself tries to justify common morals (that he calls "justice" in *Otherwise Than Being*) by the face.

I experience the face in front of the other. Suppose that a third person (the "third") comes here and that I also experience the face of the latter. Then the moral situation changes. If only one person is present, my duty is obvious. But if several persons are present, I have to consider whom among them and how much I must serve them. Previously I must not regard the other as an object of cognition, and it is not possible to regard him/her as such, as far as I experience the face. But now the claims by the faces themselves force me to regard the others as objects of cognition, and to compare them in order to decide whom and

how much I have to serve. Regarded as objects, the others become the ones without faces, and members of a moral community, where the members are equal in duty and right. Since the face is lost the asymmetry between the other and me is lost, too. So Levinas says, even I am also a member of the community and equal to the others. If his insistence that the faces claim common morals is right, the faces will justify the common morals. Then, as mentioned above, the "moral" obsession will certainly be "moral".

Yet his argument about the justification of the "justice" by the faces has some problems he does not notice. The symmetry is indispensable in order that I may move to "justice". But I do not think it is necessary for me to consider the others as equal to me. The reason is as follows. It is for the purpose of serving the others that I have to compare them and deprive them of their faces. But in order to serve them, it is not impossible and it is rather faithful to faces, for example, to leave me without rights. In short, it is not necessary to invest me with rights. So my movement to the "justice" is not any necessary answer to the plural faces nor only one possible answer for them, but it is one of the possible answers. Since I am now at the "justice" stage, I must have the freedom to select what is just among possible answers to the plural faces and I must have selected it.

Here we confront a problem. In front of the single face, I was, according to Levinas, wholly passive and without freedom. While at the stage of "justice", I must have freedom, because there in fact I decide whom and how I serve. But this freedom is at the "justice" stage. On the other hand we saw the other freedom, that is the freedom to select what is just among possible answers to the plural faces at the transfer to the "justice" stage. Levinas regards the faces as the sole means to motivate the transfer and my passivity as absolute in the "moral" obsession. Thus in his opinion, neither my freedom nor my activity could motivate the transfer. However in fact, in order to transfer to symmetrical morals, the freedom to select such morals is indispensable.

After all he cannot succeed in the attempt to prove the moral character of the obsession by attesting that common morals are grounded on obsession. Reconsidering his theory, we are reminded that the metaphysical standpoint necessitates the absolute passivity so as to insist on the absolute otherness of the other. Yet is it appropriate to morals that one considers the absolute passivity as a condition for morals? The free person who can choose either the good or the bad is the nucleus of morals. Being contradictory to such freedom, the concept of "obsession" would, even if it existed, be unrelated to morals. Indeed it is only a construct of metaphysics.

The Third Thesis

Levinas wanted to justify by the face the moral stage of "justice" where I also have rights. But we saw that we cannot justify the transfer from the face to the stage of "justice" by a logical deduction. Further in the stage we cannot justify moral norms by such a deduction. The third thesis is about the impossibility of the deduction of moral norms and its ethical effect.

What kind of concrete norms are appropriate at the stage of justice? Of course the appropriateness must, from Levinas' viewpoint, be judged by the criterion of the face. Yet when I experience the face in front of the other in misery, the face does not teach me how to help him/her. It teaches me much less what kind of moral norms are appropriate to alleviate or to avoid producing miseries like his/hers.

Can some ethical theory other than Levinas' justify a transfer to norms? Since Levinas' concept of "justice" has only formal contents such as equality between others and me, there are only a few moral theories that do not meet these conditions. Certainly Hobbes and Bentham are incompatible with Levinas owing to their genuinely egoistic image of human beings. But except for theirs, most moral theories are adequate in relation to "justice". Therefore we cannot decide which theory to take, by means of the concept of "justice". Thus we cannot logically deduce moral norms only from the faces.

I think that Levinas is aware of this fact. If moral norms were deduced from the faces, the deduced norms would absorb the role of the faces and act in place of them. But he suggests⁽⁶⁾ that the justice deduced from them does not utterly absorb them. In other words, he leaves the norms undetermined not because his argument is incomplete, but because in the nature of things one cannot logically deduce moral norms from the faces. Does this impossibility mean that the faces are practically powerless at the stage of justice.

In *Otherwise Than Being* he does not remove thoroughly this anxiety, but he says in another place that norms are always incomplete, and that the faces can motivate us to improve the incompleteness⁽⁷⁾. He does not argue there in detail, but we can draw the following conclusion from his argument.

In the first place we can suppose the reverse of the real case in comparison. If moral norms could be deduced from the faces, all I would have to do would be to obey the norms instead of the severe imperatives from the faces. I would not have to have a sting of conscience because the imperatives from the

⁽⁶⁾ *Op. cit.*, pp. 202-203, p. 205.

⁽⁷⁾ *Entre nous*, Paris, Grasset, 1991, p. 260.

faces would be absorbed by the norms. Indeed there cannot be such norms, much less the ethical theories which can deduce the norms. So I must decide by myself which norms to obey. If I seek the possible criterion for deciding it, I must return to the imperatives of the faces. Of course any imperative of the faces cannot be carried out by the norms based on the symmetry between the others and me, for the faces place the asymmetrical responsibility on me. Consequently without decisive criterion and with hesitation, I have to decide by my own responsibility which norms I will obey.

However I think this perplexity has a noticeable effect on morals. I must not be content with any existing norms, considering the faces as the ultimate criterion. I have to pay attention to those who are not helped by the existing norms, and have to experience their faces. Then I am motivated to improve the norms, as Levinas suggested in the place we referred to. So as to reduce the miseries of others as much as we can, I must strain my wits and do my level best to set better norms. Without this endeavor, the existing norms turn easily to means to justify oppression, as Levinas was afraid. In short, staying outside of "justice", the faces give us the criterion for criticising the norms at the stage of "justice", and the criticism from the criterion prevents the norms from corrupting the means to justify the oppression and losing their ethical substance.

Previously we were afraid that the impossibility of the deduction of norms from the faces implied the powerlessness of the faces. But indeed the impossibility rather makes the moral contribution by the faces to "justice" possible. The discontinuity between the faces and the norms places on me the responsibility for choosing some norms. My freedom makes the choice possible, but the concept of "obsession" loses sight of it. (Further in my book, I examine whether such a free subject could have relations with the "absolute Other" without assimilating it, hoping that the analyses of the phenomena by the ethics of care would furnish a clue.)