

On the revelation of the subject through hospitality in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas

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Introduction

My concern in this paper is to find a way of approaching Levinas's thought. This approach is complicated by the fact that studies of Levinas within educational theory have tended not to examine his work closely enough. Those studies that exist tend not to approach Levinas dialogically, through a real engagement with his thought but rather adapt his ideas to the context of the educational scene, distorting them in the process. In other words, and this is a method that is typical of applied domains of study, Levinas's thought tends to have been treated as offering certain concepts that can be taken up like tools.¹⁾

But an appropriate approach to his work cannot involve this kind of method. Rather than taking up Levinas's thought as a *methodology*, I would like to explore the possibilities and the limits of dialogue with his work. The approach I am interested involves a precise engagement with the words of his texts and with the understanding that these yield. In attempting to do this, I hope to move beyond the understanding of the human being solely as the rational subject — to be treated operationally, via techniques cultivated through psychotherapy, for example. A clue to the reception of his thought that I seek is to be found in the idea of *hospitality*. On the strength of this I am going to take a step to the side in order that the idea of reception can better manifest itself. This will not involve defining one term through other terms; instead it will involve dwelling with the words in question, dwelling with the idea of reception. As Levinas puts this in *Totality and Infinity*, language is not primarily a means of communication for linking concepts. It is the human being's need that establishes the foundation for community through language. The self is seized by the meaning of words. When "accueil" is translated into Japanese, this implies a receiving and welcoming of the other. My aim, in trying to understand

the notion of hospitality, is to bring together the idea of the “accueil” in Levinas with the sense of receiving and welcoming in Japanese.

In the response of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) entitled “the death of Levinas” there is an underlying connection with the text “Le mot d’accueil” (“The Word of Welcome”) (1997). This text was presented at the Levinas symposium held in the Richelieu Lecture Hall of the Sorbonne as the opening address of “Visage et Sinai” (“The Face and Sinai”). My paper relates to this current of thought. In thinking about this question of receiving and welcoming, it is necessary to think about the significance of ethics for Levinas. I think it is necessary to understand the world in the light of this receiving — not in terms of a separation of language and reality but through a response to the world that is like reading.²⁾

Although the question is sometimes raised of whether there is a metaphysical dimension to Levinas’s thought, in *Otherwise than Being* he describes ethics as follows: ethics is not something that you can understand as having a base. In order better to understand this, it is necessary to discuss the significance of the word “ethics” for Levinas. This is not just the question — “How are we to treat one another?” — but something different. He gives a suggestion as to this other way in his emphasis on the importance of *language*.

Questions from a stranger

When I study Levinas’ thought, it is as if I am confronted by a wall — especially in relation to the distinction between “the Other” (*l’autrui*) and “the other” (*l’autre*). The term “the Other” is used by Levinas to indicate something that transcends domains of thought that are committed to conceptualization and totalization. In the interpretation of this term “the Other”, various doubts must be entertained. What is the infinite the other? We must give up every assumption regarding language — first and above all, words related to the term “infinite”. If <the Other> transcends the domain of conceptualization and totalization, as Levinas claims, <the Other> must be taken to be beyond what I can consider or express in words. I have such a doubt and the criticism that Jacques Derrida addressed to Levinas is very much in line with this.

In addition, there is the question of the relationship between Judaism and

philosophy. I wish to untie this because Lévinas sees the philosopher as someone called by a problem and because he was in any case a Talmudic scholar. If Judaism is the other of philosophy, philosophy is the other of Judaism.³⁾

Next, with regard to the welcoming of the stranger as a manifestation of the Other, I want to attend to the style of Levinas thought, especially as this is discussed by Jacques Derrida. Derrida speaks of the welcome in his memorial lecture for Levinas, which took place in 1996 in the following way. The promise of the Messiah corresponds to discontinuity between and ethics of infinity and a political model corresponding to justice. generated by the discontinuity between the. This discontinuity enables me to agree to what Levinas says to us about peace and about the welcome of the Messiah.

According to Lévinas, the meaning of “I am I” has the aspect of the “already elected”. The term of this election are often interpreted as elitist, and as such they may be used as a basis for Israeli nationalism. But the force of the idea of welcoming sets these thoughts at a distance from the thought of “nationalism”. Then, in Lévinas’ thought, what does this phrase — “to welcome the stranger” — mean? This welcoming is always such as to separate the I from its own “home” — that is, it resists the reduction of the other to the same. If the stranger is the manifestation of the Other, the situation will be such that the welcoming of the stranger is to welcome something beyond any egocentric understanding. It is only when the I is abandoned or collapses that that one can welcome the stranger.

The truth of this idea is such as to take us back to relations of justice. From this viewpoint, to welcome the stranger, in Levinas’s thought, has nothing to do with the problem of immigration. To say “I” means already to be elected by the other. This is an election that is unlike any thought of nationalism. The Other always disturbs the I that is continuing in its “home”. To receive or welcome the stranger means to leave the place where I was abandoned.

Hospitality in Levinas’s thought

Not “You are welcome!” but “I keep waiting , without expecting others” — Jacques Derrida speaks in this way at one point. Levinas’ thought is the thought of hospitality. In encounters with the Other the initiative of the Other always runs ahead of the I. In Levinas’s alterity, the relation between the “absolute-other” as infinite and the who welcomes the stranger is a problem. In this paper, I attempt to

describe what it means to welcome the Other and what is meant by “hospitality” — the overwhelming depth that is elucidated by the relationship between these terms. The meaning of the term “hospitality” in Levinas is interpreted by Derrida. In *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (2004) Derrida draws attention to the fact that the French word “l’hôte” has two meanings: it means both host and guest. Derrida pays attention to both meanings in analyzing the idea of hospitality in Levinas. The receiving of hospitality is associated already with the notion of *dwelling*. Levinas notes that the fact that, in fact, a person who receives the other is already received by the Other unconditionally. It is always the Other that first gives the “Yes” that consents to receive the welcome. In the encounter with the Other, therefore, initiative always runs ahead of the I. It is the relationship between I and You that is implicated in what it means to welcome the Other. The I already presupposes the Other. This relationship may be regarded as involving the care-giver in relations of caring-for.

To think in terms of the welcoming of the stranger is to deny the logic of subject-object relations. The phrase “You are welcome!” shows that hospitality means to wait without expecting something. In contrast to the symmetry of relations, as for example in the quasi-contractual service relation in the hotel, what is implied in Levinas’s hospitality is a non-symmetric relation, where the initiative of the guest, the guest’s readiness for hospitality, is necessarily presupposed. While both welcome and hospitality are predicated on relations between I and you, this is not a matter of the relation between two discrete entities and of the “encounter” between them. In relations with the Other, I is not always equal, not reciprocated. I am spent in the future by the Other. Hospitality means the superiority of the Other.

Unconditional hospitality indicates that I receive you without hearing a name, without demanding any kind of compensation. On the other hand, conditional hospitality implies a computability that establishes rights and duties after already having conferred a name. Conditional hospitality is hospitality that is not open to a thought or situation that exceeds calculability.⁶⁾ Levinas tries to write less from experience than from the trial that life presents: we are tested; we are in a sense on trial. This is reflected in the way that his style itself attempts to show this hospitality to thought; it puts his thoughts on trial through language.

In conversation with Salomon Malka (1949–), Levinas says that he prefers the word “trial” to “experience”. In the word “trial”, the ideas of both the trial of life and the inspection of truth are included. The emphasis on oneself suppresses the Other.

The I, content with itself, living in peace, remaining in its own identity, comes to ask “Is there any reason for my existence?” The true significance of having been born a human being upsets my existence. It cuts me off from the security of identification with myself (1989, Salomon Malka “Lire Lévinas”).

At the same time as the word “hospitality” expresses a scene of welcoming of the Other, there is also something difficult about this reception for the I. In other words, there is the advent of the Other from which the I comes. Then, a question arises for the I as a rational subject: “Because I am in my own house, should I not resist the stranger who comes suddenly out of nowhere?” And the question follows: “Is there a reason for me to exist?” — a reason beyond the *I* remains as I in all its obviousness. Hospitality comes to us as a severe and demanding question.

The world that is revealed by reading Levinas is a world that does not allow us to be understood, not at least understood without remainder. When he talks about infinity, he pictures the self as living desperately in the world, as needing to live in exposure to the Other, and this as necessary to living well in the world.

According to Levinas, philosophy is not an intellectual enterprise that departs from the memory of experience; it is rather an arrival at words, an openness to words. To speak of hospitality is to break open the world, understood naturalistically, to a kind of trial.⁸⁾

The receptive-responsible mode of thought and hospitality: in dialogue with Paul Standish

Paul Standish⁹⁾, writing about humility and education, and drawing on the work of Michael Bonnett, provides a characterization of a receptive-responsive mode of thinking that stands in a relation of acknowledgement to the world. He contrasts a voyage on a sailing boat with a voyage in a power-boat as a means of thinking the relation between autonomy and heteronomy. The sailing boat uses natural power whereas a powerboat travels across the water in an independent way, overriding natural forces. The movement of the power-boat, where the traveler is insulated from the natural environment, suggests a rational-assertive mode of thought, which contrasts with the receptive-responsive the other-regarding orientation that is implied by the movement of the sailing boat.

With reference to an example drawn from Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, Standish offers an image of receptive-responsive thinking that is shown to connect with the basis of morality (1992, Standish). Standish's receptive-responsive mode of thinking seems to connect with Levinas's theory in that he places emphasis on a kind of heteronomy and on the way that this must be a condition of autonomy.

The subject's autonomy is to be understood as like that of the person in the sailing boat, pursuing a direction by using the tide and the wind well. The example suggests something of the idea of "the face" in Levinas, of the way in which the subject is handed over to the Other.¹⁰⁾ Standish goes on to explain something about the notion of receptivity, describing this as a state of openness to experience and thought.¹¹⁾ On the other hand, Levinas describes a form of the welcome of the Other in *Otherwise Than Being* (1974) in terms of learning, hearing, and understanding in such a way as to suggest a receptiveness in the style in which one learns. This is an order in which the dichotomy of theory/practice no longer has any meaning (QTB). epts.

Standish speaks of a passive experience of the self in relation to the other person, distinguishing this from a conception of the self dominated by activity, which maintains the I in its subjectivity.

Levinas describes relations with passivity in this way. In passivity the I discovers the self as always already breached by contact by the other. This breaching of the self by the face happens before any self-consciousness of the I as I. The I is elected as the appeal of the infinite Other and as the addressee of the command before any freedom of the self. The I is commanded to the good. There is always a past passivity in the ethical subject. This passivity cannot reduce receptivity to any activity-related zero point. It is related to the past essentially. I become a self as I, and the existence that is called I is established as the existence of a subject with active voice only as a result of its being drawn by this election. But this means that I cannot identify this thing called passivity while I am immersed in this system. The experience of the face constitutes the ethical subject, transforming the rational subject since the I is born before self-consciousness. (QTB)

In this way, the welcome of the Other in Levinas is presented as directed by what is ultimately an im-possible relation, a relation that exceeds any receptive-responsive mode of thinking. (1999, S. Kumano). Although the ideas of Levinas and Standish may seem similar, there is a decisive difference between the state of

the subject itself, understood in terms of the contrast between the rational subject and the ethical subject, in terms of what Levinas calls the welcome of the stranger, and the receptive-responsiveness emphasized by Standish. The ethical subject for Levinas is explained in terms of a horizon that it cannot go beyond and in terms of what it cannot receive — not in terms of an opening receptiveness towards the world. There are philosophers who speak of passivity, but the passivity in question in Levinas's thought is a passivity more passive than any receptivity (QTB). Hospitality in the Levinas pictures a state deeper than receptivity, overwhelming receptivity in its passivity.

The present paper was prompted by the question of whether we can understand the Levinas's welcome of the Other by way of the contrasting modes of thought and being considered by Standish. It has tried to consider whether Standish's thought might lead into an understanding of Levinas. What the paper has shown is the difference of the positions of the rational subject, who replies to someone who can reply, and the ethical subject, who is forced to a reply that cannot measure its distance from the Other, which is to say to an impossible reply. Throughout his thought Levinas criticizes the preoccupation with being in philosophy, and his thought, including his ideas of welcoming and hospitality cannot be understood without reference to this.¹²⁾

You must It is necessary, if it as at all possible, to break through at least two barriers. The first barrier is the barrier of the dichotomy of subject and object, which has influenced the whole of the context. In other words questioning here is determined by a closed economy of thought constituted in this way.¹³⁾ The second barrier is to be found in the im-possibility of expressing the relation to the Other — in other words, in understanding this as something beyond *experience*, of understanding the pain or the death of the Other as precisely *beyond*. I cannot go through these two barriers as long as I am *I*.

❖Notes

1) In my subject, I proposed the term of “the scene” in a restrictive meaning as the place in demanding a practical method (an effect, concreteness, utility). My study of considering the relationship of “the scene” and “language” is progressing in talks with an education counselor, Yamashita, J., (the education support center in Koga-city, Ibaraki, Japan).

2) For example, for a student do not want to go to or cannot go to school from various reasons, in the educational scene, indicating the situation understood only as “a *truant* student” (*Hutoukou* in

Japanese) made a type.

- 3) It is an idea to be “a free gift” caused by a system and synchronism being defeated through diachrony, disproportion, disorder that is common to Derrida and Levinas. (S. Handelman. 1991. *Fragments of redemption*.)
- 4) By the arrival of foreigner, evacuate own house to the other. Levinas’ thought is ‘home-less’ thought in my view.
- 5) About “the ethic of the care”, referred to Noddings, N. 1984. *Caring*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- 6) The hospitality Levinas said be to “to receive you unconditionally”? The absolute hospitality is theoretically fraught with possibility of perversion and the corruption.
- 7) About sensitivity, referred to *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*
- 8) referred to *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*
- 9) Prof. Standish said, “To get virtue, we need a sense for otherwise than Being or beyond Essence in a distance of our own”. He expresses such a sense by words called ‘humility’. This word may be interpreted by a story called “experience” and “the maturity” in the context of the education (study) or pedagogy.
- 10) The example of *King Lear* is nominated for an example showing that it is achieved as a result that ‘to be humble overcomes arrogance’, a state of the subject was crucified.
- 11) The Comment of Prof. Standish for my presentation in “2006 Kyoto University Graduate Students’ International Colloquium on Educational Research “Theoretical, Practical and Ethical Horizons of Educational Research”
- 12) I do not say that [receptive-responsive mode] is good not [rational-assertive mode]. In various self-help groups, psycho-therapy, The term of the reciprocity or the relation, it is easy to be interpreted in [receptive-responsive mode]. Therefore, I think that, when we consider the meaning of ‘clinical’. It is important for us to listen to Levinas’ concept telling the human — relations — which cannot explain in [receptive-responsive mode]. And I think that the Levinas’ studies of Prof. Standish may have been developed based on “Totality and Infinity” (or, text before the criticism of Derrida). He draws a flow of Levinas in the ocean current of his context in his study and tries to bring about a new ocean current. I expect it about a future study of P. Standish who included the horizon of Levinas’ concepts in *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*.
- 13) Prof. Standish discusses it about “Open economy” and “Closed economy” in the education.

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❖Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Prof. Standish (University of London) for closely examining my first draft. He provided valuable comments and politely pointed out errors.

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