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Levinasian Ethical Project and Its Relevance to the Contemporary Society

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Abstract: Renowned French-Jewish philosopher Immanuel Levinas posits a novel approach to philosophy. Levinas argues that traditional western philosophy, because of its overemphasis on reason, is far removed from the realities of day-to-day life. A philosophy that fails to address the pressing challenges of the time and that which does not impel one to reach out to one's neighbour is practically futile. Drawing inspiration from his Jewish roots, Levinas proposes ethics as the first philosophy. His bitter experiences as a Jew in the context of the Second World War served as the harbinger for his ethical project. In doing so, he introduces certain terms which are apparently familiar to us but are laden with meanings and symbolism. This article tries to argue that the Levinasian ethical project as it is proposed in his key writings is an antidote to the growing sense of alienation among different sections of society

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today. Levinasian ethics prompts one to reach out to one's needy neighbours.

Keywords: Epiphany, Face, Ethics, 'The Other,' Levinas

Introduction

One of the greatest defects that plague contemporary human society is the brutal indifference to the plight of others. Pope Francis did not mince his words when he called this indifference a 'virus', which we must fight with. He says, "I do not grow tired of repeating, that indifference is a virus that is dangerously contagious in our time, a time when we are ever more connected with others but are increasingly less attentive to others." Indifference paralyzes and impedes us from doing what is right even when we know that it is right. Who is to be blamed for the proliferation of this culture of cold indifference? Perhaps the traditional western philosophy with its over-emphasis on the primacy of reason seems to have forgotten to pay sufficient attention to the plea of the downtrodden.

However, we have in the person of Emmanuel Levinas a man who sought to reconnect philosophy with the real life situations of the common man. He posited a new understanding of ethics, which has a direct bearing on the lives of our less-privileged brethren. In this article, I would like to explicate the ethical project of Levinas and its relevance in our contemporary society.

This article explains the ethical project of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. It tries to explore the relevance of Levinasian ethics in the contemporary society.

Early Life, Education and Background

Emmanuel Levinas was born to Jewish parents in Lithuania in the year 1906. After the migration of his family to France, he attended Strasbourg University and then Freiburg University. He was under the tutelage of the doyens of phenomenology; Heidegger and Husserl. Though he began his philosophy as a phenomenologist, he chartered a new course in that realm wherein ethics was given due recognition. His important works are *Totality and Infinity*, *Existence and Existents*, *Otherwise than Being*, *Time and the Other* and *Beyond Essence*.

Judaic Influence

Levinasian scholars would undoubtedly agree that his upbringing as a practising Jew has had a tremendous influence on his philosophical explorations. Levinas was a practising Jew and was well versed in Talmudic Hebrew. He has written extensive commentaries on Talmud. Some of the terms that one comes across in his works like ‘face’, ‘height’ and ‘epiphany’ and clearly of Talmudic origin. Levinas’ call for responding to the plea of the other, who is the poor, the orphan and the widow, is a clear indication of the Talmudic origin of his philosophy. He attempts to make the biblical love for the stranger a philosophically intelligible thesis.

Criticism of Traditional Western Philosophy

Levinas had strong reservations against the traditional western philosophy. He argued that the traditional philosophy with its overemphasis on reason was far removed from the life of common. Philosophy, according to him, nurtured nostalgia for totalising. It also sought to divide everything in terms of categories; human relations being no exception to this totalising tendency. Metaphysics was given prime importance in the philosophical circles and it was also considered the ‘first philosophy.’ Therefore, Levinas proposed ethics as the ‘first

philosophy.’ For Levinas, human relations were of greater importance than metaphysical speculations.

What compounded his disillusionment with the traditional philosophy is his experience during the Second World War. Being a Jew, Levinas saw for himself the plight of thousands of hapless victims of Nazi brutality. He disagreed strongly with his mentor Heidegger for his overt support of Nazism. Levinas sensed the need to reconnect philosophy with the stark realities of life and thus we have the Levinasian ethical project, which is primarily based on human interactions.

Levinas believed that the aim of philosophy is not to make us better thinkers or to understand better, at least not for its own sake. It is to get us to live better lives, to act with greater generosity and goodness, to be a better parent, a better friend, a better lover, a better statesman, a better teacher- all by acting towards others with more responsibility and concern than we do. Our goal should be to see, and act because we see that caring for others is the whole point of our lives at all; it is to respond to the “secret tears” of the other.

Highlights of Levinasian Ethics

Levinasian ethics is radically different from other schools of ethics propagated by philosophers like Kant, J Bentham or J S Mill. For Levinas, ethics is not a set of rules or moral codes. Ethics, for him, is basically optics. Ethics happens, literally before our eyes, as the face before us calls us into question. Ethics is ‘an optics’ as it begins as a vision, through which we intuit our ethical responsibility. It is all about relating oneself with the human Other. Levinas uses the word ‘ethics’ to refer to the face-to-face’, or ethical relation to the human Other. It is in the context of the human relation involved in ethics, Levinas brings the idea

of face-to-face relation. The ‘face’ of the ‘Other’ impels me, calls me to reach out to him or her. The face of the Other impels me to be ethical and responsible.

Now, the terms ‘face’ and ‘Other’, which are used extensively in the Levinasian discourse require further explanation. It may be noted that these terms are not used as they understood in the normal sense. What then is a face for Levinas? He writes:

A face is not like a plastic form, which is always deserted, betrayed by the being it reveals, such as marble from which the gods it manifests already absent themselves. It differs from an animal’s head in which a being, in its brutish dumbness, is not yet in touch with itself. In a face, the expressed attends its expression, expresses its very expression, and always remains the master of the meaning it delivers. A “pure act” in its own way, it resists identification, does not enter into the already known, brings aid to itself, as Plato puts it, speaks. The epiphany of a face is wholly language.

Levinas employs the word “face” with the greatest care. The face of the other person is not the appearance of the other person; it is not a collection of features given to visual perception. It has no parts, no components. The face means what it is: imploring, a plea of the weak to the powerful or the poor to the rich. The face is the way the other person presents herself to me.

Who then is the ‘Other’? The Other, Levinas contends, is not a member of any human species. It is neither a concept nor a substance. The Other is also not defined by properties nor by its character. It is neither a social position nor a place in history. The Other is not an object of knowledge or comprehension as well. Nor it is an object of description. The Other is the one that we ought not kill. The Other is absolutely other than the self. The other is the other oneself.

The way the Other appears in the face is described by Levinas as ‘epiphany’, which in turn is a visitation. The term visitation understood in its etymological meaning, underlines the act of coming from outside toward someone. Levinas also argues that the relation between the self and the ‘Other’ (whose face impels me to be ethical) is not symmetrical. It is an asymmetrical relation, wherein the ethical command to be responsible proceeds from the Other. If this relation were to be symmetrical, the Other becomes merely another me and it becomes no longer a stranger. The face of the Other makes a singular command because of this asymmetrical relation.

Levinas contends that in the face of the Other, there is an elevation, a height. The Other is higher than I. Height does not mean heavens, might, riches, etc. but the fact that the other person’s demand transcends my ‘being-at-home’. The Other is a stranger, widow and orphan because he is from beyond the familiar world of the ‘I’. The other is always the poor one, poverty defines the poor person as the Other, and the relation with the other will always be an offering and a gift, not an ‘empty-handed’ approach.

Responsibility for the ‘Other’

The pinnacle of the Levinasian ethical project is the notion of responsibility for the ‘Other’. Levinas acquired the concept of responsibility from the Judaic tradition. He takes this concept of responsibility from the Torah and gives it a philosophical explanation. Philosophically speaking, responsibility is a situation prior to any conceptualization. It is an obligation to respond to the Other, a responsibility to and for the other person.

What is the nature of this responsibility? Normally to be responsible means to be accountable for our actions and work. However, such a responsibility is a limited one; it is

founded on freedom. It has no value beyond free choice. We cannot be held responsible for what is beyond our freedom. Levinas disagrees with the priority of freedom over responsibility. He argues that man is invested with responsibility even when he does not want to be. Man does not choose to be responsible; he belongs to responsibility. It is not a result of free choice. Everybody is responsible for everyone. In short, I am responsible for my brethren when they are in distress.

Before the 'I' could choose to be responsible, it is made responsible. This would mean that 'I' is left with little choice but to be responsible. The face of the Other puts 'I' in a state of restlessness or ethical insomnia. This restlessness is so powerful that 'I' cannot escape it and makes himself/herself available to the needs of the Other. Levinas says that this responsibility conditions the structure of the subject itself. The face awakens the 'I' to responsibility, puts it in a 'restless unrest', an 'ethical insomnia'. The 'I' cannot escape this. The 'I' collides with the Other, and the Other becomes the 'spirit' or 'spirituality that animates and inspires the 'I'. Thus the 'I' realizes its responsibility for the Other, through the Other.

Relevance of Levinasian Ethics in the Contemporary Society

As I had mentioned earlier, Levinasian ethics is the most suited antidote to our society, which is marred by cold and cruel indifference to the sufferings of others. Levinas, by drawing an analogy from the Sacred Scripture, exhorts us to open to the plea of the needy. What makes Levinasian ethics original and pragmatic is its foundation on human relations. For Levinas, ethics is impossible unless people interact with one another and respond to the plea of the Other effectively. This makes his ethics universal and effective.

By being ethical, one cannot but shed one's ego and self-centeredness. The plight of the Other puts my ego to shame. It provokes me to go beyond my selfish interests and find ways and means to address the plight of the one from the ethical command proceeds to me.

Levinasian ethics is practical because it is connected with our day-to-day life. In ordinary life situations, we make choices. We make choices as to how to act, who to spend time with, who to share one's energy and resources with. Our answers to such apparently trivial questions chart the direction of our life. Historical, social, economic or political situations may differ from time to time.

I would argue that Levinasian ethics is relevant all the more in this world of ours today. The rise of populist leaders, the rise of majoritarianism, the continuing plight of refugees and other displaced people, the unabating violence against women and children and the indifference of the rich to the poor mar the ethical landscape of humankind. In these challenging times, a philosophy that gives heed to the cry of the poor, the orphan and the widow stands out a beacon of light at the end of the tunnel.

The moral philosophy as proposed by Levinas finds its application in our families and the society at large. We have numerous examples of generous person who spend their time and energy for their less privileged brethren who are abandoned in the streets and alleyways or dislodged in hospices. We have examples of government officials going out of their professional mandate to ensure that their fellow citizens avail the government benefits. The successful social movements that we have witnessed around the world stem from the sense of responsibility of the social leaders towards their fellow citizens. We see in our families the sick, the old and the disabled being taken

care of with love by our mothers, mothers and siblings. What moves them to do this is not the plea from the face of the Other, who is less privileged and is not in a position to fend for himself/herself.

Levinas' life and thinking were deeply affected by the trauma of the Nazi genocide, better known as the Holocaust. The unspeakable horror unleashed by the Nazis on hapless Jews brought about a drastic change in his philosophy and thinking. One of the reasons for the perpetuation of such unspeakable crimes against Jews was the indifference of the then international community to the plight of the suffering of Jews in various concentration camps. The society that we live in is no better. Our families and communities are plagued by this cruel culture of indifference. The hardships and pain of the other fail to make any difference in most of us. Levinasian ethical project comes into action at this juncture. It tells us to pause for some time in our pursuit of money and fame. It impels us to create a culture of encounter, of a fruitful encounter, of an encounter that restores to each person his or her own dignity as a child of God, the dignity of a living person. Most of us when encountered with the plight of others may at best exclaim: 'What a shame, poor people, look how they are suffering,' and then we carry on with no apparent change of heart. Levinas would go a step further and exhort us to respond proactively to this crying, pleading face of the other. Such a response will invariably curb the culture of indifference in our society.

Conclusion

Levinas and his ethical project is undoubtedly a perfect antidote to the virus of indifference, about which I referred in the opening paragraph. Levinas does not give us any rules or norms as such like many other moral philosophers like Kant, Aquinas, J S Mill or J Bentham. Levinasian ethics is defined

solely by human relations and interactions. This makes it flexible, tangible and practical. Though the terms ‘face’, ‘Other’ and ‘epiphany’ sound abstract, the message conveyed by means of these images makes his philosophy intelligible.

Levinasian ethics gives a clarion call to all men and women of goodwill who strive to rebuild the human society on egalitarian grounds. It gives direction to those striving to eradicate tears from the eyes of others. However, it may also be observed that Levinasian ethics, despite all its claims and merits, does not offer a panacea for all the pressing problems afflicting human society. I would say no theory can ever propose a universal solution to the very many challenges faced by humanity. Nevertheless, Levinas and his ethics remind us of our obligation to the less privileged in our society. The choice before us is either to pay heed to the plea of the Other or to ignore with cold indifference.

The ‘virus’ of indifference is far more dangerous than any other ailments that can plague humanity. Failing to respond to the desperate plea of our brethren make us less of human beings. Levinasian ethics, taking cue from the biblical command of love for one’s neighbour, urges us to live our meaningfully, by being available to others in times of their need.

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