

## Book Review

**Roger Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other: A Multidimensional Ethic of Responsibility in Levinas*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2009, pages: vi + 152, ISBN: 978-81-89958-26-7.**

Roger Burggraeve's *Proximity with the Other: A Multidimensional Ethic of Responsibility in Levinas* cutely encapsulates the dominant concepts, centred on radical alterity and living for the other, in the Levinasian oeuvre. One could not ask for more lucidity and coherence as the book is a veritable *tour de force* in clarity, especially in the context of a lot of obfuscation that one encounters these days about Levinas. The five chapters support and complement one another so that the book achieves a sort of resonance from the beginning to the end.

The first chapter demonstrates the penury, as it were, of the traditional Hobbesian basis of societal life which is believed to be a delicately poised equilibrium of mutual interests regulated by a state. In such a dispensation, in spite of the democratic airs of the above view, appearance, self preservation, and fear of each other become the fountainhead of life. Human life, in other words, is possible only on a "negotiated armistice." Such a society is at best ignoble and at worst hazardous. Levinas' thought, as dealt with in the following chapters, demonstrates that such a contractual peace of essence is unstable, untrue, and even unbecoming of humanity. The book goes on to highlight Levinas' view of society, as based on a foundation other than the selfish attempt at self-preservation.

The second and third chapters spell out the essential tenets informing Levinas' ethics. Levinas shows that society is not so much a result of the predatoriness of humanity as their preoriginary responsibility and benevolence. Levinas invites our attention to the dynamism in human beings which surpasses the self-interest

of essence. The author shows how the centrality in Levinas shifts from the ego to the other, and how responsibility springs not from the first person but from the second, described in the book as heteronomy. This heteronomy precedes one's freedom. Levinas' thought is also presented as an emphatic rejection of the mainstream western tradition springing from the Cartesian cogito. For, in Levinas, the being of the 'I' is not the equivalent of "to be," instead its 'being' is "otherwise than being" and, hence, "beyond essence."

The book shows how the other appears as radical alterity, the ineffable, and the incomprehensible in Levinas. The self is shown as awakened by the other, jolted into awareness, as it were, unexpectedly and from nowhere.

The writer extensively dwells on Levinas' concept of 'face' which is enigmatic. There is also the caution against reducing the other to the 'same', to the 'I', which is violence and homicide. Philosophizing the other is tantamount to violation and extermination of the other, for, rather than philosophize, in Levinasian ethics, one talks to the other.

What singularizes the human person, according to Levinas, is not race, status, sex, or looks, but the fact of being called to be the only one near the other here and now. If one refuses the responsibility for the other, which is possible though forbidden, evil makes its presence. It shuts out the possibility of good beyond essence.

Levinas' ethics is presented as radical in the sense that one's responsibility extends to the actions not only of one's own, but of others as well. This exposition to the other, according to Levinas, is 'preoriginal' and 'an-archival'. Further, for him, to be human is to realize that it is inscribed as such in one's body.

The attempt to view Levinasian thought in terms of the dialogical personalism and social personalism appears to be a tidy categorization of this ethics by the author, even as one feels that these sections could have been further elaborated.

The fourth chapter, "Sociality and Money," adds to the value of the book considerably, as much as it gels with the previous chapter on social, economic, and political responsibility. Besides, this part in particular stresses the primacy of praxis in Levinas' ethics to reinforce the fact that Levinas' vision is not the ivory-towered abstraction that it is sometimes thought to be.

The recollection of the personal “Monday afternoon meetings” of the author with Levinas makes the little book a treasure on its own. Far from being a “risky undertaking” due to its possible “coloured” perception as the author apparently suspects, the chapter is a gem of a testimony.

While an annotated bibliography would have been a welcome addition to the book, the author’s exploitation of the etymological richness has helped bring greater dimension to the text. The provision of the original French words has also been apt. The book, as it delivers far more than the title indicates, should find its way to numerous libraries and readers.

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