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THE OTHER'S DIFFERENCE AND ETHICS OF PLURALISM IN LEVINAS

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1. Introduction

'Integration' – national, global, or communal – is necessitated primarily by the exigencies of 'difference', manifested either in hideous forms of hatred and violence, or in more subtle forms of grudging toleration and frozen interaction. It is from an awareness of difference, arising from varieties of social categories like sex, colour, race, caste, tribe, language, and religion, and the abjectly damaging consequences of personal as well as social interpretation of the significance of such differences that the goal of integration gathers urgency in a nation's priorities and an individual's value system. Any foundationist explanation of integration for its own sake may help to build an ideology, but may not be helpful in the realm of praxis. A usual strategy for promoting integration is to appeal to our common humanity, nationality, planetary citizenship, or to a common divine inheritance. The fact of 'differences', however, seems to override such appeals to generalities made out of honing the sharp edges of difference. Human beings, despite whatever they have in common, do form a radical plurality and resist the unifying tendencies by asserting and articulating their difference and uniqueness.

In the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), we have an alternative perspective that seeks to show 'difference' itself as the ground for coming together. Levinas was not merely a composer of philosophical texts;[1] he is even better known as a Talmudic commentator and there is a definite undercurrent of religious themes running through even his philosophical writings. Michael Purcell shows that Levinas draws a line of

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[1]Levinas' two most important philosophical texts are *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1969, and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981. Henceforth, references to *Totality and Infinity* shall be made in the text itself by using the abbreviation 'TI' and *Otherwise than Being* by the abbreviation 'OTB'.

demarcation between his 'philosophical' and 'confessional' writings. They are 'distinct methods of exegesis', or 'separate languages'. However, he admits that drawing a strict line of demarcation between his philosophical and religious writings is a difficult proposal. Purcell writes: "Better to recognize that, at times, Levinas writes in a style that is more strictly philosophical and, at times, in a style which is more strictly religious. Nonetheless, it is the one Levinas who is writing, and from a singular ethical provocation."[2] In what follows, we shall have occasions to refer to the religious side of Levinas' ethical defence of pluralism. We shall now proceed to discuss various shades of Levinas' ethics and see how they contribute to a radically ethical vision of plurality.

2. Ethical Foundation for Radical Pluralism

Levinas' philosophical objective was amazingly focused and single-minded throughout an expansive span of over four decades of writing. Right from the early essays, he redundantly and untiringly harps on the same theme of "my absolute responsibility for the other," each time with more extreme and fresher expressions and rare passion. This he did in a France which was then overwhelmed by Sartre's existentialism and, then, by Derrida's deconstruction. There was no audience for ethics. Interestingly, his writings entered serious philosophical discussion through a mediation on Derrida's works.[3] Levinas' views, as may be that of many other writers, are born out of a single experience, the experience of the Holocaust, and the method he chose for writing was one that dealt mainly with human experience, i.e., phenomenology. Having studied under both Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg, Levinas is credited with one of the most creative applications of Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's phenomenological ontology. In fact, it was not in native Germany but in France that creative outcomes of the labours of Husserl and Heidegger came to light. Levinas' writings manifest a reflective spirit and his approach of laying bare the many layers of consciousness unwrapping for the reader a labyrinth of some strikingly new insights, an ethics without the do's and the don'ts, an originary ethics.

After the Holocaust, Levinas tried to write philosophically about that experience in a very direct manner. His oeuvre as a whole is a response to

[2]Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 46.

[3]Simon Critchley, "Introduction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Critchley and Bernasconi, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 1-6.

that phenomenon and its experience. While publishing the translation of a 1934 essay, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," in a 1990 issue of the *Critical Enquiry*, Levinas wrote a prefatory note for it. In this note, he pointed out that the source for Hitler's philosophy is not a "contingent anomaly within human reasoning," not an "accidental ideological misunderstanding," but its source was "the essential possibility of elemental Evil into which we can be *led by logic* and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself."[4] He also succinctly wrote in that brief preface about his concern for the ontological project's character of 'gathering together' and 'dominating'. Elsewhere he would say that the western conception of philosophy and knowledge in general is a 'swallowing', 'devouring', 'generalizing', 'levelling', 'assimilating', and 'reducing'. It is about forgetting the dissimilarities and converging on the similarities, and again concentrating on the similarities of the similar and on similarities among the dissimilar. In that preface, he reiterated that what was to be called into question was the subject's freedom, a freedom to smother the other underfoot, a freedom to do whatever that could satiate the self. In Levinas' writings, we see the limits of the subject's freedom, which is ethics, and a limitless responsibility for the other. For us, this preface is crucial. It summarizes the philosopher's assumptions and his ambitions.

For us, the Levinasian project is one of looking for an ethical foundation for radical pluralism. This foundation ought to be something beyond Christian universalism ('all of us are children of God') and modern liberalism ('all of us are free moral agents capable of laying out our own projects and achieving them by granting the other the same freedom'). Not that this foundation ought to be completely secular, but it ought to be human and drawn from human experience. Universalism does not touch at the heart of the other's otherness and liberalism bypasses the other's 'right' to exist as other, first and foremost. Hence, Levinas searches for a pluralism based on the other's absolute otherness. John Wild writes in his introduction to Alphonso Lingis' English translation of Levinas' first *magnum opus*, *Totality and Infinity* (1961): "It is the disciplined development of a pluralistic point of view that has not been thought through before" (TI, 19). Here, focus is not on a metaphysical pluralism of

[4]Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," trans. Seán Hand, *Critical Enquiry* 17, 1 (1990), 63; emphasis added.

the existence of many entities or substances, but on the social condition of human multiplicity and difference, a fact which calls for integration of human difference rather than violating them for the sake of a unity. It is not that only social groups are multiple, as though within a group there is an intrinsic identity, as though an individual in a group can be adequately labelled under a group. For Levinas, the other person is absolutely irreducible to the same, the self. In the conventional understanding of the process of knowing, in the act of knowing the other – who or whatever be that other – that other, so to say, becomes part of 'myself'. She or he, if the object of knowing were the other person, becomes a mental picture concocted in my mind and resides there. I possess her or him and make her or him a prisoner of my image of her or him. I reduce him or her to my consciousness. As an intentional subject, I 'adequate' the other to the object in my consciousness. Levinas' protest is basically regarding such 'adequation' because, for him, there is no way I can master the other and reduce him or her to an image. The other stands wholly and entirely other to my attempt to level her or him to an image in my mind. This is the crux of Levinas' sustained critique of the whole tradition of western philosophy. Traditional philosophy, as an adequation, "leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny" (TI, 47). The other is an infinity that cannot be totalized. Levinas is looking for an ethical base for pluralism – the amicable, harmonious coexistence of human persons in society despite the fact of their inassimilable differences – that is averse to murder: symbolic murder of the other's otherness or literal murder as grotesque as six million human lives sacrificed in Hitler's gas chambers. For the subject, every other person is irreducibly dissimilar to her/him. Hence, not only the one who is culturally or otherwise dissimilar to me is a stranger: every other is a stranger, a foreigner and I am a stranger and foreigner to every other. In fact, the other is the neighbour, the face. In clarifying the aim of his first *magnum opus*, Levinas says: "The effort of this book is directed toward apperceiving Desire – where power, by essence murderous of the other, becomes, faced with the other and 'against all good sense', *the impossibility of murder*, the consideration of the other, or justice" (TI, 47; emphasis added).

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas posits this 'consideration of the other' as unconditional hospitality and infinite responsibility for the other. We read in an early passage of the book: "This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality" (TI, 27) and, later, that "It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign

… that constitutes the original fact of fraternity" (TI, 214). However, in his second *magnum opus*, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), he further radicalizes the idea of responsibility by introducing the notion of 'substitution', which is an inversion of identity, 'one-for-the-other', 'having-the-other-in-one's-skin', 'incarnation', and makes possible the phenomena of sacrifice, compassion, and pity.[5] If TI is written in the classical hermeneutico-phenomenological style, OTB is stylistically more difficult, as it picks up a rhapsodic poesy of sorts after the young Derrida's penetrating and yet sympathetic critique of TI that while challenging the ontology of the same, especially in Heidegger, the work does not do itself any good by using the weapon of the language of phenomenological ontology to challenge that very ontology of adequation of the other with the same.[6] If in TI "The Subject is a host" (TI, 299), in OTB, "The subject is a hostage" (OTB, 112). Radical phrases like "I exist through the other and for the other" (OTB, 114), "obsessed by another" (OTB, 123), "unlimited responsibility" (OTB, 124) and the like make frequent appearances in the tightly woven text. Such a conception of the primacy of the other in thinking about an inter-subjective ethic found occasional space in the Russian novelist Dostoevsky, especially in his *The Brother Karamazov* (1880). While talking to Phillippe Neme, Levinas radicalizes this primacy of the other and refers to Dostoevsky's well-known passage:

> I am responsible for the Other without waiting for his reciprocity... Reciprocity is *his* affair... You know that sentence in Dostoevsky: '*We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others*.'… I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. I always have one responsibility *more* than the others.[7]

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[5]See OTB, 113-118, and Bernasconi, "What Is the Question to Which 'Substitution' Is the Answer?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Critchley and Bernasconi, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 234-251.

[6]Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, 111.

[7]Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Neme*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, USA: Duquesne University Press, 1985, 98-99.

3. Ethics as First Philosophy

It is to be noted that Levinas does not take the word 'ethics' in a conventional sense as in virtue ethics, utilitarianism, deontology or as in the analytics of ethical language or as in metaethics. For him first philosophy is neither metaphysics nor ontology: "Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy" (TI, 304). Ethics is the way of relating with the other, the way of seeing the other person. Alluding to Heideggerian *mitsein* (Being-with), Levinas says that before thought dawns, before ontologizing and totalizing, before thematizing and categorizing, there is already the relation with the other. In Heideggerian terms, Being-in-the-world is already, always, before hand a Being-with. But, unlike in Heidegger, Being-with is already ethical before it is captured in thought and ontologised. As we said earlier, the single underlying assumption of Levinas' work is to plead the impossibility, inconceivability of murder in the name of ideologies and generalizations. Through an evocative rather than expository prose, meditative rather than argumentative style of writing, Levinas wants to make sociality sanctified by appealing to an ever-guilty human conscience that relentlessly burns for not having fulfilled its known and unknown obligations. Even when distant hungry hungers and thirsts, even when anonymous mobs lynch the wailing stranger, even when unpreventable tsunami swallows up countless fishing hamlets, I feel guilty for having been not responsible enough for the other, the faceless other; guilty for my powerlessness to empower the powerless; guilty for my helplessness. Levinas defines ethics as "calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other" (TI, 43). That is, every face to face relation is a challenge placed on my freedom by the presence of the other and so it is ethical always already. What is ethical is the very act of relating, and it is this "relation which is ethical, not an ethics that is instantiated in relations."[8] While speaking to Anne-Catherine Benchelah in 1986, Levinas explains his phrase "ethics is first philosophy" more lucidly:

> When I speak of first philosophy, I am referring to a philosophy of dialogue which cannot *not* be an ethics. Even the philosophy that questions the meaning of being does so starting from the encounter with the other. This would amount to a manner of subordinating knowledge and objectivization to the encounter with the other that is presupposed in all language…

[8]Critchley, "Introduction," 12.

> Even if there is ill will on the part of the other, the attention to and welcome of the other (like his recognition of me) marks the anteriority of the good over and against evil.[9]

In an insightful introductory essay on Levinas' ethics, Roland Paul Blum points out that as against the bounded ethics of great minds, like Immanuel Kant and John Rawls, which clearly lay down principles to show the limits of human obligations, Levinas' conception is one of unlimited obligation. In Rawls, for example, the representative human derives the ethical principles of conduct in society on the basis of rational self-interest and these principles, in turn, are a guarantee of human freedom and happiness in a social context. Levinas' thesis is that responsibility for others is a "permanent fact about oneself. It has never been consciously assumed and it can never be discharged."[10] This ethical bond between persons is not born out of comprehension, argument or already known principles, but from the sensibility of exteriority, one's experience of radical alterity, from the face. The sensible ego's subjectivity is thrust open by the encounter with alterity. Before the subject's freedom, before comprehension, alterity demands of the subject 'goodness'. Existence is weighed down by the "gravity of having to bear the burden of alien existence" (OTB, xxi) and what lies at the base of ethical relationship is not our specifically human nature, rational agency or moral imperatives, but our sensibility, our passive susceptibility and our material incarnation. If the human is a subjectivity, it is also a subjectivity face to face with an alterity. Its aloneness too is relative to alterity. The goodness in the subject that allows alterity is the ethical despite the temptation of the senses to devour and enjoy alterity as sameness. Ethics which questions the ego is accomplished as service, hospitality, welcome. In language, the manifestation of the ethical is accomplished. If the human was not originally ethical there was no need for a language. "… [B]ecoming conscious (of alterity) is already language… the essence of language is goodness… the essence of language is friendship and hospitality" (TI, 305).

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[9]Emmanuel Levinas, "The Proximity of the Other," trans. Bettina Bergo, in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins, Stanford, USA: Stanford University Press, 2001, 211-212.

[10]Roland Paul Blum, "Emmanuel Levinas' Theory of Commitment," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44, 2 (1983), 147.

4. Pluralism, Peace, Religion, the Underprivileged

The very last section of TI is titled "Being as Goodness – the I – Pluralism – Peace." We know that existentialism and many faces of and movements around subjectivity dominated the intellectual circles of France when Levinas brought out his first important work. It is also well-known that the finest exponents of the existentialist thesis, Sartre and early Heidegger, both frowned at intersubjectivity as an obstacle to the subject in its one-dimensional march towards individual authenticity and the overcoming of bad faith. Heidegger of *Being and Time* (1927) considers sociality as a necessary existential condition of *Dasein*, but 'the anonymous they' weighs down *Dasein* to everyday inauthenticity. Sartre's famed pronouncement "The other is hell" is representative of his radical subjectivity thesis. While Levinas admires Heidegger's attention to the concrete, the existential, even while articulating the classical philosophical problem of being, he abhors Heidegger's adoration of Being, especially after the latter's brief but provocative Nazi rendezvous. Given this context, undoubtedly, Levinas is thinking of both subjectivity and alterity and how they can coexist, not in militant opposition, war and violence, but in peace and goodness amidst the very impossibility of their opposites. In the final section of TI, Levinas says that the ethical relation with alterity is the ethical basis for pluralism.

> Transcendence or goodness is produced as pluralism. The pluralism of being is not produced as a multiplicity of constellation spread out before a possible gaze, for thus it would be already totalized, joined into an entity. Pluralism is accomplished in goodness… *The unity of plurality is peace*, and not the coherence of the elements that constitute plurality (TI, 305-306; emphasis added).

This conception of pluralism is to be carefully distanced from all totalizations. It is a forward movement of goodness emanating from the subject towards the other which positively allows the other her alterity and there is no totalization or generalization or truth ethically higher than this movement of goodness. While one is deeply immersed in this pluralist society, one transcends it in sheer goodness expressed in language. This pluralism of radical alterities manages to find rhythm is peace. Peace is not achieved in a uniformity, not in the end of war, not in a political system; it rather is a subjective condition of the I's goodness, an I satisfied with the merger of the ethical and the real. Ethical judgment of the truth of the subject's condition does not come from an impersonal reason or from a contract, but from beyond it, from the other.

In conceiving pluralism and peace as the I's goodness, we cannot pass by Livinas' allusion to a religious spiritual vision without caring to take a closer look at it. In all his writings, there is a passionate, almost Kierkegaardian commitment to the other, which at the base is religious.[11] In fact, for Levinas, ethics is religion: "We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (TI, 40). Drawing a distinction between politics and religion, he says that politics tends towards 'reciprocal recognition' and 'ensures happiness', whereas 'religion is Desire', "the surplus possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself" (TI, 64). Hence, religion is the very enactment of ethics. God, whom Levinas calls 'other than the other', 'other otherwise', "other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with another and different from every neighbour,"[12] is absolutely unknowable, but if any trace of Him is available, it is foreshadowed in the face of the other. Hence, "his being 'without resources' has to be heard like cries not voice or thematized, (but) already addressed to God."[13] That is why Levinas says that although the other is not the incarnation of God, his/her face "is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed" (TI, 78-79). In the earlier quoted prefatory note, Levinas says that the human person is already elected by God to the vocation of responsibility for the other and it is God who "beholds him in the *face* of the other man, his neighbour, the original 'site' of the Revelation."[14] Thus, Levinas calls the relation of the subject's responsibility for the other, the condition of being the hostage of the other, "the religiosity of the self" (OTB, 117). The subject being a hostage, its substitution is a witness to God: "The subject as a hostage has been neither the experience nor the proof of the Infinite, but a witness borne of the Infinite, a modality of this glory that no disclosure has preceded."[15]

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[11]See Wes Avram, "On the Priority of 'Ethics' in the Work of Levinas," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, 2 (1996), 261-285.

[12]Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, 165-166.

[13]Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 167.

[14]Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," 63.

[15]Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 169.

We need to note that Levinas was continuously anguished over the plight of the disadvantaged, the strangers, the refugees, those without a home or a country. A dignified space for them, a world of relations for them, he thought, would not be possible without such a conception of absolutely other-centred originary ethics. The subject is not a being that bears some qualities called moral; it rather is unique because of its ability to divest itself of its very being for the sake of the other, it can become a hostage of the other, it can subject itself to the universe (OTB, 116-117). We said that Levinas bases his ethics on a sensible, material plane, which is more sanctified than the sacred; it is the spiritual itself. He writes: "… one has to first enjoy one's bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart, to give oneself in giving it. Enjoyment is an ineluctable moment of sensibility" (OTB, 72). He was in search of a realm of ethics beyond the merely rational; a realm irreducible to knowing (OTB, 80). In doing so, he was also in search of an ethical basis for pluralism wherein the alterity of the other is upheld.

What is at stake here is an acceptance of radical pluralism and an ethics to support it. Any pluralism of merger is, thus, rejected; no convergence is intended. No cultural assimilation; no attempt at homogenization. We can ethically accept the other's difference from us. Levinas is not concerned about ethical principles and whether they are universal or particular. His concern rather is that ethics, whether universal or particular, arises from a primary relation, which is universal. If this relation were not there, there would have been no ethics. Hence, for Levinas, if there were only a single individual in the world, there would have been no ethics. But to say this is to misread Levinas, because he assumes Heidegger's *mitsein* and rejects Cartesian dualism, first of all, to start speaking of the ethical relation, which is not thrust upon the ego, but which is the ego's only possibility of existing. But here Heidegger's fundamental ontology is already ethical beforehand. Our fundamental goodness to let the other be other arises out of our sensual-spiritual nature. From the ego's subjectivity, desire, enjoyment and transcendence, in its incessant and frantic race to satiate the ego's hunger to fill itself, there is the other that ethically resists comprehension – the attempt to devour. Levinas locates the ethical in that experience of relation, which is older than selfishness. Failure to gauge, comprehend and, thus, murder the other's otherness, allows the letting be of that alterity. This is the prehistorical originary ethics before law, before commandments.

For Levinas, questions like 'why the other concerns me at all' arises from the supposition that "the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself… But in the 'prehistory' of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles" (OTB, 117). Levinas feared that the ontology of unity and merger was inherently violent. In a concrete historical sense, as we noted earlier, Levinas believed that the whole of western thought, right from Socrates and his predecessors down to Husserl and Heidegger, was an egology, the ontology of the ego. Further, that this was no mere aberration or accident but something that could directly lead to a cultural failure like the Holocaust. The trauma of experience is here searching for alternatives. If I am different from you, if my 'blue eyes' and 'dark skin' and 'homelessness' make me an absolute stranger to your familiar world, do I still have a chance to be with you and share your home and table and land? For Levinas, alterity is the world beyond the ego. He writes:

> The other is maintained and confirmed in his heterogeneity as soon as one calls upon him… The invoked is not what I comprehend: he is not under a category. He is the one to whom I speak – he has only a reference to himself; he has no quiddity (TI, 69).

The degree of the otherness of the other varies, but otherness still it is beyond the land of the ego. The letting be of this otherness, which is there already as the foundation of relation, is also the basis for pluralism – radical as it is. Levinas' is a philosophy of hope; its air is certainly spiritual. In his philosophical works, Levinas does not relinquish the Hebrew's messianic hope: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6).

5. The Question of Justice and Politics

Levinas is often criticized that in his completely other-centred philosophy, there is little room for the notions of justice and politics. In a society marked by radical pluralism, there is not only the face-to-face relation. There is the society at large; so, there arise questions of justice and the exigency of deciding who is in the wrong. Who is Levinas' other? It is the other person in my face-to-face relation, with whom I communicate in language. In fact, he calls the other, the face: "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name

face" (TI, 50). It is the concrete other, the neighbour. What about the others? This is an important question because pluralism is 'my' relating to the 'many' in incredibly complex ways.

Levinas rightly observes that these relations are asymmetrical and many times completely escape all our attempts to comprehend, order, and thematize them. If my responsibility for the other weighs me down to the extent described by Levinas, especially using expressions like 'substitution', how about my relating to an other, other than the face, the neighbour? Levinas does not avoid this question,[16] and calls the 'others other than the face' 'the third party'. For him, the face is itself the mirror of the third, the whole humanity. The universal neighbour, the poor, the stranger is already there in the concrete neighbour, the face that speaks: "The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other… the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (TI, 213). Again, "It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign… that constitutes the original fact of fraternity" (TI, 214). The religious air of Levinas' theory is clear here, because while saying that fraternity is not a "humanity united by resemblance" but still "involves the commonness of a father," Levinas asserts that "monotheism signifies this human kinship" (TI, 214). But don't we have a problem of over-generalization here? That is, if every other is a neighbour, to whom I am infinitely obliged, what happens when there is a question of who is in the wrong? How does the subject, weighed down by infinite responsibility, respond to that? From such an overburdening starting point of infinite responsibility, can we meaningfully speak of a concept of right and wrong in any way? How does justice realize itself?

For Levinas, 'letting the other be' is itself justice. "To 'let him be' the relationship of discourse is required; pure 'disclosure,' where he is proposed as a theme, does not respect him enough for that. *We call justice this face to face approach, in conversation*" (TI, 71). So, ethics is justice. The objective of TI is described as "the establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man – signification, teaching, and justice – a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest" (TI, 79). But we know that beyond the singularity of the one-to-one contact, there is the realm of distributive justice, the realm of wrongdoings and right-doings. Levinas writes: "If proximity ordered to me

[16]Levinas deals specifically with the question of justice in both of his important works. See, for example, TI, 212-214 and OTB, 157-162.

only the other alone, there would have not been any problem… The responsibility for the other … is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters" (OTB, 157). The appearance of the third points to the limit of responsibility and brings up the question of justice, which is a matter of comparison, thought, consciousness, objectification, coexistence, thematization, intentionality and the intelligibility of a system. That is why Levinas says that, to certain extent, it is a betrayal of "my anarchic relationship with illeity" (OTB, 158). However, we need not rush to think that Levinas is against politics and the order of the state. His whole philosophy, it is true, is a critique of politics, as conceived by the west, which has led to war and violence, homicide and inhumanity. He, however, never questions the need for politics and justice; what he critiques is the assumption that politics needs to base itself all the time upon the same assumptions. He rather wants to found a politics that is based on infinite responsibility for the other. He writes: "Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of the one for the other" (OTB, 159). He believes that such a politics is required if the face that is completely different from mine is to be welcomed and extended hospitality.

> … [J]ustice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest. The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights. The forgetting of self moves justice (OTB, 159).

Justice and politics based on the interests of the ego, its freedom and equality is bound to fail. He wants to show that political rationality alone is not a panacea for all modern ills. It alone is not the solution to all political problems. The ethics of responsibility for the other is and needs to be reclaimed as the foundation for politics. We now can see how, as a philosopher, Levinas gave himself the ambitious goal of showing the inconceivability of violence. This problematic is discussed vividly in the context of Europe in a 1984 essay, *Peace and Proximity.*[17]

Of course, Levinas shies away from saying anything more on the imperatives of justice, how to adjudicate between rival claims. However,

[17]Levinas, "Peace and Proximity," trans. Peter Atterton and Simon Critchley, *Basic Philosophical Writings,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, 161-169.

this was never to be the order of inquiry of Levinas. His ethics is not one of rules and norms and laws. Hence, his critique of modern politics, based solely on political rationality, is not to busy in normative debates. For the critic, however, there is the genuine problem of engaging in ways to see how such a conception helps at the level of normative political theory. However, such attempts have not been altogether absent. Drawing from recent continental tradition, Michael Dillion, for example, speaks of 'another justice', which is to be contrasted with the normal calculative model of distributive justice. Dillion argues that occasionally 'another justice' "confounds our habitual modes of justice and challenges us to rethink, and find ways of readdressing, the injustice of which all modes of distributive justice are necessarily and integrally composed."[18] Would there be an exemplar case of such a challenge? Dillion points to the case of the refugee in the current international politics as a singular example where distributive justice fails and one needs to look for 'another justice'. We may note also that Levinas was not altogether outside the question of the distribution of justice. In fact, can a person be so if she/he were to participate in life in some way? Following the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila by Phalangists in 1982, supposedly supported by Israeli defence forces, there was a radio dialogue with Levinas, in which Shlomo Malka asked him to definitively clarify if politics was not the very site of the encounter between the self and its other, and whether or not for the Israeli, the Palestinian the other in a fundamental sense. The reply of Levinas is seen by many as definitively political and by some as a blot on the philosopher of the other. He said:

> The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily a kin, but who can be. And, in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.[19]

[18]Michael Dillion, "Another Justice," *Political Theory* 27, 2 (1999), 168.

[19]Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics and Politics" in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand, London: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 294.

For us, however, this reply opens up the very difficulties of the ethics of responsibility when applied to a politics.[20] Of course, theoretically it also shows that there is no fixed other as such for any self.

We need to underline Levinas' suspicion of politics as such. He was sceptical of the possibility of good politics, based upon the primordial ethical sense of responsibility for the other. Moreover, he emphasized on the primacy of the ethical over the political. He writes in the preface to TI: "The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means – politics – is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naiveté" (TI, 21). While politics assumes reciprocity, ethics does not. Ethics is unconditional; politics is a limited sphere of operation. What Levinas hopes for is a politics founded upon an unconditional ethics. He writes:

> Metaphysics, or the relation with the other, is accomplished as service and as hospitality. In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality. But politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as in absentia. In welcoming the Other I welcome the One High to which my freedom is subordinated (TI, 300).

Radical doubts have been expressed by many admirers and critics of Levinas that attempting to work out anything practical from such a point is near to impossible. While Derrida calls TI "an immense treatise on hospitality" and recognizes that a question of radical politics like free asylum to refugees was always in the mind of Levinas, he acknowledges the difficulties in an essay written, commemorating Levinas' heritage on the occasion of the latter's first death anniversary.[21] For him, to shelter the foreigner in one's own land is a criterion of humanness.[22] Difficulties of a challenging moral conception need not make it impossible, need not make

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[20]For a thoroughly political reading of Levinas' works, see, Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, London: Routledge, 2002.

[21]Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass, Stanford, USA: Stanford University Press, 1999, 64.

[22]Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith, London: The Athlone Press, 1994, 98.

out to be 'too good to be true' and inordinately utopian. The transformative power of humanity is attested in its power to rethink the past, reconstruct the ways travelled and move forward.

6. An Idealistic Pluralism

There is, thus, the question of religious ethics and all ethics with underpinnings of a religious ethos tending to be overtly idealistic. The same accusation is not applicable to, say, a conception like that of Rawls' theory of justice, which has a more practical aim of a contractarian base for a political system of cooperation. Levinas' ideal, on the other hand, seems to be aiming to create within the individual and the community, a notion of perpetual debt, guilt and inadequacy, rather than providing any practical guideline on the face of the problems of life. Its role is inspirational rather than prescriptive and normative. Levinas is, of course, aware of this predicament:

> *The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed*; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am (TI, 244).

Again: "It is as though I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving" (OTB, 91). However, its inspirational role is not denied: "… the plot proper to saying does indeed lead it to the said, to the putting together of structures which make possible justice and the 'I think'" (OTB, 46).

Levinas claims that the outline he provides is to be the foundation for any sorting out of the guidelines. But drawing guidelines is problematic because his notion is not itself bounded; it does not show its own limits, unlike the theory of Rawls. Hence, there is the possibility that responsibility itself is so trivialized that one does not need to be actually responsible at all, but what is important is one's intention of responsibility, one's predisposition. That is, one can be responsible without any act of responsibility. Perhaps, Levinas himself felt the pangs of his extreme teaching. The philosopher who demanded that we should not even look at the colour of the other's eyes, also made a few public statements betraying prejudice.[23] But the doctrine itself is clear. I am always 'a guilt' for everyone and this guilt is never finished and atoned for. "Thus, proximity

[23]See, for instance, Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental?" 288.

is never close enough; as responsible, I am never finished with emptying myself of myself."[24] The idea here is so radical that Levinas says that without having done any wrong, the self is constantly under accusation and persecution (OTB, 114). However, how does Levinas explain his thesis of infinite responsibility? Probably, we need to go back to Sartre for a similar explanation of another idea, namely, freedom. For Sartre, either one is totally free or not at all. Similarly, for Levinas either one is responsible for everything and for everyone, or one has refused all responsibility. That is possibly the only answer to the criticism that to be responsible for everyone is to be responsible for none.[25]

While Levinas founds his theory of infinite responsibility on the subject, the subject here is inordinately weighed down by the other, say critics.[26] There seems to be an excess of the other. There is no place for the ego. The escape from being[27] is ultimately an escape into the other. Are there not dimensions of selfhood that resist absorption into the realm of intersubjectivity? For instance, there is grief that cannot be shared but has to be grieved and borne; such grief probably does not demand a response. In a self, exhausted by the other, there is no space for the private, the personal. Is pluralism, finally, an effacement of the self? If Heidegger and Sartre and political systems like that of Hitler narcissistically proclaimed a tyranny of the individual, especially the authentic one, is not Levians' alternative treads the other extreme – the tyranny of the other? Roland Paul Blum comments that Levinas' use of the nonsocial categories of one of his principal sources, Kikerkegaard, at the social plane leads to both the problem of the absence of reciprocity required for any intersubjective theory and the problem of disallowing the self its rightful privacy. Blum concludes that only a religious reading can make true sense of Levinas' notion of infinite responsibility.[28] However, we need to remind ourselves that Levinas' pluralism is inspirational and idealistic, evocative rather than argumentative. His philosophical project's aim is to constructively think beyond twentieth century's genocide and champion the Hebraic

[24]Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 169.

[25]Bernasconi, "What Is the Question to Which 'Substitution' Is the Answer?" 239.

[26]See Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental?" 263-302 and Lingis, "Objectivity and of Justice," 395-407.

[27]See Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Stanford, USA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

[28]Blum, "Emmanuel Levinas' Theory of Commitment," 145-168.

understanding of peace. OTB was dedicated to the closest among the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust and to "the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism" (OTB, dedication). His fundamental insight was to reclaim ethics as the foundation of philosophy and of human existence.

7. Conclusion

Levinas' aim was never to provide an authentically practical guideline for pluralism. However, it can give us insights into a truly democratic ethos of pluralism. For us, the central pillar of Levinas' theory is a militant opposition to an assimilationist and convergence notion of pluralism. The 'melting pot' imagery, very often used for a supposedly multicultural democracy, is to be rejected and a pluralism that unconditionally tolerates multiplicities has to be accepted. Social labelling and blanket generalizations are attempts at murdering the irreducible other. All assimilationist ideas are inherently violent and conceal within them potent violence. Will the cultural communities, just as the many dissimilar others, exist as separate islands incapable of conversing in a common language of cooperation, while at the same time carrying for each other an infinite burden of responsibility for each other, requiring to tolerate all doings, right and wrong, of the other, just because it is the other's doings, because the other gets the priority of consideration? This is not the spirit of Levinas' writings. Upon the foundation of the burden of responsibility we carry for each other and for each other's otherness, we can practically work out a system of cooperation, rules governing it, civic injunctions, legal system, etc. But the foundation of society and the moral assumption of the individuals comprising it is the acceptance of the burden of responsibility for otherness. For us, at this point, Levinas is pleading for a fraternity rather than a citizenry; even if this be a nation, it is an ideal state of godly respect for each other. However, this is not a theocratic state of the faithful bonded to each other by a faith. It is a spiritualized democracy of fraternity. 'Integration' is to climax in such an authentic pluralism. Things 'different' integrate and disintegrate; things 'same' form an undisturbed identity. Hence, integration in a pluralistic context would not make differences disappear or let them merge into an undifferentiated unity. It ought to be an integration in spite of differences – an integration that embraces differences and accepts them in all goodness. Integration of such a genre resounds with the true import of the phrase 'unity in diversity'.