
To be human is to be responsible for the Other: a critical analysis of Levinas' conception of "responsibility"

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ABSTRACT

The history of Western Philosophy, especially in continental Europe, has always revolved around the following "metaphysical triangle": World (cosmology); Self (anthropology) and Deity (theology). Since René Descartes, there has been a shift of paradigm, from the cosmological and theological angles to the anthropological angle wherein the human subject had become the axis on which everything hinges. Emmanuel Levinas gave subjectivity a radical turn. For him, traditional ethics and philosophy are grounded in egoism and the neglect for the "Other" as they overemphasise self-fulfilment and self-development. They overlook human solidarity and cooperation. In this paper I discuss critically Levinas' argument that subjectivity is born out of our relations with the Other and that our responsibility for them defines its fundamental structure and is the foundation upon which all other social structures and formations rest.

INTRODUCTION

Levinas'¹ concept of responsibility must be seen against the backdrop of a period that he characterises as "millennia of fratricidal struggles, political or bloody, of imperialism, scorn and exploitation of the human being ...century of world wars, the genocides of the Holocaust and terrorism; unemployment and continual desperate poverty of the Third World; ruthless doctrines and cruelty of fascism and national socialism..." (Levinas 1999:

¹ Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1906 of Jewish parents. His family was uprooted by the First World War and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. He studied the Hebrew Bible and many Russian authors whose writings led him to study philosophy in France and Germany between 1923 and 1929. Among his many works, his greatest are *Totality and Infinity* (1969) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1981). He died in 1995.

132)². This was a period in which Europe's theoretical reason, grounded in Hellenic reason, could not prevent the aforementioned catastrophes. Because of this failure, Levinas' ethics of responsibility seeks to exalt a somewhat different logic and thought – a logic other than that of Aristotle and a thought other than that of the so-called civilised (Levinas 1999: 133).

Emmanuel Levinas enters the philosophical stage through Husserlian phenomenology which in his view succeeded in overcoming the classical anti-thesis between realism and idealism, including the Cartesian subject-object dualism. Phenomenology transformed the Cartesian “*cogito ergo sum*” into “*cogito cogitatum*” (Moran 2000: 4-5 & 16-17), which implies that the thinking subject has company at last – it has objects of thought. But what particularly attracted Levinas to Husserlian phenomenology is Husserl's notion of “intentionality” – a notion that underscores the directedness of consciousness towards an “other”³. However, I must hasten to point out that Husserl's usage of the term “other” does not necessarily mean a “human other”, but otherness in general. The events that took place between 1933 and 1945⁴, which escalated eventually into what is generally known as the Jewish Holocaust, led Levinas to be increasingly dissatisfied and critical of Husserlian phenomenology for what he claims is its openness to solipsistic tendencies⁵. Levinas became insistent on the intersubjective dimension of phenomenology, especially in his early writings. His phenomenology is attentive to the way in which the human Other inhabit the horizon on one's experience and present themselves as a demand to oneself and also how they call one to get outside the sphere of one's own self-satisfaction and preoccupations. Therefore, Levinas expounds a phenomenology of alterity. According to him, subjectivity is born out of its relations to others (Levinas 1985: 96). For him, “being-for-the-other” defines who I am. To be Self, argues Levinas, “signifies then, not to be able to get out from under responsibility” (1966: 41). This view of subjectivity is radical. It is inspired by the Judaic tradition from which Levinas comes. It is not surprising that in his works he intertwines Greek philosophy and Judaic

² This volume of essays under the title of *Alterity and Transcendance*, translated in 1999 by Michael B. Smith, was originally published in French in 1995.

³ For a detailed explication of the notion of intentionality, see Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, 1960.

⁴ These are the events in which Adolf Hitler declared a double pronged war. On the domestic front he waged a racial war against the Jews whom he regarded as the “infernal defilers of German honour”. On the international front he brought about a situation that escalated into the Second World War. For details of this double pronged war, see Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1992: 285-302) in *Problems in European civilisation: World War II, Roots and causes*, edited by Keith Eubank.

⁵ An extended critique of Husserl's notion of “intentionality” is also expressed in Levinas' essay, *Nonintentional Consciousness*.

thought. It is for that reason that Levinas is often described as a philosopher who inhabits the intersection of two traditions, namely, Athens and Jerusalem (Topolski 2008: 216-217; Burggraeve 2007: 21-39). What Levinas brings to *Hellenic* reason is the dimension of thought where the accent is laid on alterity and heteronomous freedom than on self and autonomy. Topolski (2008: 224) characterises such a freedom as a freedom that finds its meaning in responsibility for the Other.

RESPONSIBILITY – CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

Burggraeve maintains that “since the Enlightenment, anyone viewing the world through Western lens has become used to thinking of responsibility as the extension of, and even the synonym for, autonomy and freedom” (Burggraeve 2009: 66). The sense of “responsibility” Levinas uncovers is much deeper and more radical than the existential one of active commitment to self. Blanchot, who comes closer to Levinas, contrasts the two senses of responsibility, thus:

Responsible: this word generally qualifies – in a prosaic, bourgeois manner – a mature, lucid, conscientious man, who acts with circumspection, who takes into account all elements of a given situation, calculates and decides. The word ‘responsible’ qualifies the successful man of action. But now [in the philosophy of Levinas] responsibility – my responsibility for the other, for everyone without reciprocity – is displaced. No longer does it belong to consciousness; it is not an activating thought process put into practice, nor is it even a duty that would impose itself from without and from within...Responsibility which withdraws me from my order – perhaps from all orders and order itself – responsibility which separates me from myself (from the ‘me’ that is mastery and power, from the free speaking subject) and reveals the other in place of me, requires that I answer for absence, for passivity (Blanchot 1986: 25).

It is this second sense of the word responsibility that concerns Levinas, and it is precisely this that I seek to discuss in this paper. When the word responsibility is construed as such, observes Blanchot, it “comes as though from an unknown language which we only speak counter to our heart and to life...[for] it becomes an incomprehensible word... summoning

us to turn toward the disaster” (Blanchot 1986: 26-27)⁶. Burggraeve describes this sense of responsibility as “responsibility in the second person” (Burggraeve 2009: 65) because it does not originate with the subject. It comes from outside the subject. In this responsibility, the autonomy of the subject is put into question. Caputo is in accord with Levinas on this point, especially when he describes responsibility as, “to give up your Greek autonomy and agency and to submit to the jewgreek heteronomy and patience” (Caputo 1993: 125). In responsibility the subject seems to be called to sacrifice his or her autonomy and agency. This is one of the problematics that many of Levinas’ readers have with Levinas. However, this problem is more pronounced in societies that are non-communitarian.

Levinas makes an intrinsic link between the words, “responsibility” and the “Other”. He maintains that to be responsible means to make oneself available for service of the Other in such a way that one’s own life is intrinsically linked with the Other’s life (Levinas 1985: 97). In other words, I am a human being in the sole measure that I am responsible for another. It is suggested by Levy that perhaps Levinas was influenced by the linguistic kinship in the Hebrew language, of the words, “other” and “responsibility”, which in Hebrew are rendered as *aher* and *aherut*, respectively (Levy 1995: 299). The latter word has *aher* as its root. This would mean that responsibility for the Hebrews (Jews) conveys an attitude of outward looking. It opens an ethical dimension by connecting me to him/her (Levinas 1981: 102). For Levinas, responsibility is therefore a “place” where I bind myself to the Other (Levinas 1981: 12). But it is not a “binding” as when a piece of material is bound to the block of which it is a part, nor as an organ is bound to the organism in which it functions (Levinas 1966: 41). I think Levinas sees in responsibility a “place” in which the Self enters into a relationship that is disinterested, but not indifferent, with the Other. Responsibility seeks the good of the Other. It does not look for recognition in the Other. Levinas’ description of desire demonstrates clearly the relation of disinterestedness. Although desire characterises sociability, it is not a simple relation. Levinas distinguishes “desire” from “need”. He describes the latter as “the return itself, the anxiety of me for myself, the original form of identification which we have called egoism (Levinas 1966: 38-39).” Implied in this, is that the object of need loses its otherness. It becomes part and parcel of the Subject. Desire, on the other hand, asserts Levinas, “proceeds from a being already full and

⁶ Own parenthesis [].

independent” (1969: 254-255). It does not want for itself. This means that the desire for the Other is not an appetite but a generosity (Levinas 1966: 39). Here, the Subject reaches to the Other for the sake of the good of the Other. Thus, desire reveals a structure in which there is a relation of disinterestedness (non-erotic) between the Subject and the Other. Levinas uses the following imagery to clarify further the non-returning movement of desire: He asserts that in desire, the Subject is “like a being who opens a window which has been mirroring him” (Levinas 1966: 40). Jobling (1991: 419) concurs with Levinas in this regard when he argues that “desire goes to the Other not in order for the self to fulfil itself, to find its own identity, or to facilitate its self-totalization.” But more importantly, the desirable never fills the Subject’s desire, instead deepens it. It is for this reason that Levinas sees desire as something that nourishes with a new hunger. In desire, the Subject is relating with the Other, who puts the Subject into question and does not cease to drain him/her (Levinas 1966: 39). In the relation of desire the Subject is never at rest or at peace with itself. The Subject is perpetually striving towards the Other in a movement that never comes to rest because the desired does not satisfy the hunger. Furthermore, Levinas’ concept of responsibility is concrete. He refers to it as “the duty to give to the Other even the bread out of one’s own mouth and the coat from one’s shoulders” (Levinas 1981: 55). It is interesting to note that Levinas is not referring to one’s surplus bread and spare coat. One has to give away the very ones that one has and depends upon.

Levinas contends that responsibility, as an order or command that I receive, does not originate with me. It precedes me. But not only does it precede me in the sense that it originates with someone before me (like my parents or a generation before me), it is pre-original. It refers to a past which is irrecoverable and pre-ontological (Levinas 1981: 78). It stems from a time before my freedom, and before my beginning. It is an absolute past that has no subject (Levinas 1969: 56, 85 & 89). This means that for as long as one *is* one *ought* to be responsible for another.

RESPONSIBILITY AS AN-ARCHY

Modernity has accustomed us to view subjectivity in terms of mastery and control. This is evident in Kant in which the Subject holds and assembles everything together in transcendental unity (Kant 1997: 230-233). Since for Levinas responsibility does not originate with the Subject, the Subject cannot master it. It is not the Subject’s ethics, but

ethics of the Other. This implies that the Subject supports and is subject to everyone. It is precisely for this lack of control and inability to quantify responsibility that Levinas characterises it as an-archy (Levinas 1981:101). Looking closely at the idea of anarchy, Enrique Dussel,⁷ who shares the same understanding of it with Levinas, distinguishes “anarchism” from “anarchy”. The former, for him, is “a process that has no conductive principle or rationality ... it is a process without direction” (Dussel 1985: 61). In this sense, anarchism has a negative connotation. However, anarchy, on the other hand, means “beyond the principle” (Dussel 1985: 61). It is something which is beyond rational principles, but not of itself chaotic. Herein, the Subject feels lost, because there is no structure or system to fall back on, as a guiding principle. So, Dussel concurs with Levinas in regarding the anarchy of responsibility as something positive. Responsibility is anarchic as the Subject is ordered or commanded by what he or she cannot represent to Self. He/she is charged with responsibility against his/her will, hence caught unprepared. Responsibility is therefore an obligation prior to any commitment or merit on the part of the Subject. Levinas likens it to the sacrament of Orders (priestly ordination) in which the newly ordained priest is ordered to serve the community entrusted to him/her, but at the same time given powers to exercise his/her ministry.

But in responsibility for the Other, for another freedom, the negativity of this anarchy, this refusal of the present, of appearing, of the immemorial, commands me and ordains me to the other, to the first one on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbour...what is exceptional in this way of being signalled is that I am ordered toward the face of the Other. In this order which is an ordination, the non-presence of the infinite is not only a figure of negative theology. All the negative attributes which state what is beyond the essence become positive in responsibility (Levinas 1981: 11-12).

The theology or spirituality of the sacrament of orders emphasises that the one who is ordained did not merit it. He is called and elected out of gratuity.

⁷ Enrique Dussel is an Argentinian philosopher, theologian and historian. He was influenced by Levinas' philosophy and applies it to concrete socio-political situation in Latin America. Levinas himself mentions and acknowledges Dussel as a political thinker. See Levinas' essay (1998), “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*.

The anarchy of responsibility is, however, synonymous to “disorder”. But Levinas is at pains to show that it is not a disorder that is opposed to order. He contends that it is a disorder of a different order (Levinas 1981: 101). It is a “disorder” because it refuses synthesis or re-presentation before oneself. But it is an “order” as it establishes new ethical relations between the Subject and the Other - relations in which the Other is recognised as other.

The condition of anarchy produces in the Subject, some suffering. But, it is a suffering that defies adequate explanation, and hence leads to more frustration. Levinas cites the biblical narrative of Job⁸. In this story, Job is unable to accept his experience of suffering. After a thorough examination of his life, all factors point to the opposite of his suffering. His life deserves blessings from God, not suffering, because he was a good and obedient servant to Him. It is this lack of the “cause” of suffering that intrigues Levinas in the story of Job. Job is as it were, persecuted for what he did not do. He is responsible for what did not originate with him.

It would appear that Levinas and Dussel’s regard for anarchy as positivity reflects their own dismay and distrust of socio-political structures and systems of their own respective home countries. They both lived under tyrannical socio-political orders of repression for the Other. Dussel bore the brunt of Spanish colonialism in Argentina and Levinas survived the anti-semitism that was endemic in his time.

NOTION OF SUBSTITUTION

Being-for-itself is a mode of being in which the Self is pre-occupied with itself, and therefore, indifferent to the Other (Levinas 1969: 87). Levinas uses the term “being-for-the-Other” (Levinas 1969: 261) which in his later work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond essence* (1981) modified to “the-one-for-the-other” (Levinas 1981: 77) in order to escape the language of ontology, to indicate a position in which the Self is responsible for the Other. He contends that “being-for-the-Other” requires that one exercises “sensibility” (Levinas 1981: 77). Sensibility, especially in *Totality and Infinity*, implies exposure or being in proximity to the Other. It involves standing in the place of another and offering protection to them (Levinas 1969: 135-136). It extends to sacrificing one’s life for the Other. To be for

⁸ The book of Job is a story of a good man who suffers total disaster. He loses all his children and property and is afflicted with a repulsive disease. For details, see Book of Job in The Bible, chapters 1-3.

the Other, argues Levinas, is to answer even before the Other calls. It is to make an allegiance to the Other before one commits oneself through an oath (Levinas 1969: 150). How can this be possible? Is Levinas perhaps being too pious as Caputo (1993: 32) remarks? There is clearly a philosophical gap or shadow in Levinas' construal of the concept of responsibility as being-for-the-other. This gap is perhaps filled comfortably by what Burggraeve (2002, 2007: 22) describes as the Jerusalem pole of Levinas' thought.

Levinas introduced the notion of "substitution" in his philosophy as an attempt to avoid the traditional language of Ontology.⁹ But this move was gravitational towards the Jerusalem pole. The notion is used as a critique of the western philosophical concept of "identity" which Levinas associates with self-coincidence, self-possession and sovereignty. In other words, in 'substitution' the identity of the Subject is under question and challenge, especially in the context of responsibility. In this regard, Levinas is reacting against Sartre and Hegel for whom the self is posited as a for-itself.

According to Levinas "substitution" is indispensable to the comprehension of subjectivity. It is the process by which the Subject empties itself of its being, so that it makes space for the Other. Substitution for Levinas is aptly described by the phrase "one-in-the-place-of-another" (Levinas 1981: 14). It entails undertones of passivity, which is unlike the notion of "self-sacrifice". In substitution, the Other is not merely an object of representation, as in Husserl. Substitution is not a psychological event of compassion (Levinas 1981: 146), but it is putting oneself in the place of the Other, who is distinct from me. He also maintains that substitution is "having-the-other-in-one's-skin" (Levinas 1981: 115). This is a hyperbole, which signifies that in the notion of substitution, identity is inverted. The Subject plays a protective role to the Other just as it is the function of the skin to protect the whole body against external hazards. Having the Other in one's skin also signifies "ethical maternity" (Levinas 1981: 108). Burggraeve corroborates Levinas on this point. He points out that to have the Other in one's skin is to be a womb for them. He observes that a womb is essentially involved with the Other rather than with itself (Burggraeve 1985: 77). Burggraeve further observes that there is a close parallel in Hebrew between *rekhem* (womb) and *rakham* (mercy). Linguistically, the latter word is derived from the former. *Rekhem* denotes brotherly or motherly feeling, while *rakham* signifies steadfast

⁹ See introductory notes to Levinas' essay (1996) "Substitution" in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 79.

love. Hence to have the Other in one's skin, is to be merciful to them. In the Old Testament of the Bible, mercy is a divine quality. It indicates love and devotion exemplified in the covenant God made with Israel, despite Israel's unfaithfulness (Douglas 1962: 761).

Having the Other in one's skin is to be answerable for them and not to say, "I am *I* and he is *he*" as the biblical Cain did. Taking the Other's place extends to bearing their faults, or being responsible for their responsibility. This is an overthrowing of Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Levinas claims that in ontology, *I* and *he* are separate beings who have nothing to do with each other, except simply marching together (Levinas 1998: 116). Substitution, and hence ethics, is far from being possible in ontology. *Dasein* is only concerned with its being, its ownmost being.

Substitution also involves persecution of the Subject because the Subject is not only taking care of the Other, but is moreover, answerable to his/her mistakes or misdeeds. The Subject is therefore *sub-jectum* in the real sense of the word. The subject is the one placed under the control and authority of another. Levinas uses even a stronger word to describe this condition of the Subject. He argues that the Subject is a *hostage* (Levinas 1981: 125). It is interesting to note the choice of this word. It seems that Levinas deliberately refrained from using the word "host" because it conveys a sense of being active and free in one's act of generosity toward others. For example, to host a party (feast), is an activity of free choice. But to be a hostage is to be held against one's will. Thus, the Subject, as a hostage, appears to be under persecution.

Levinas seems to justify the persecution of the Subject by spiritualising it. He regards it as an expiation or sacrifice. Here, the Subject atones for the sins of others, including itself (Levinas 1981: 112). The subject is, so to say, the scape-goat. This is the goat that goes away into the desolate place, because it has been chased away from the village. In the Torah, this was a ritual signifying that sin, in a symbolical way, was removed from human society and brought to the region of death (Douglas 1962: 1077). This was how people atoned for their guilt or sin. It is evident that Levinas' conception of responsibility calls for the Subject to be prepared to die for the Other, or to make a sacrifice without reserve, for the neighbour.

RESPONSIBILITY "MEASURED"

It is as if Levinas realised that the "infinite responsibility" for the Other is an impossibility,

and therefore necessitated the ushering in of what he calls the “third party”. The “third party” in Levinas, broadens sociality:

But I don't live in a world in which there is but one single 'first comer'; there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my fellow. Hence, it is important to me to know which of the two takes precedence (Levinas 1998: 104).

According to Levinas, the third party points to the fact that the Subject and the Other cannot form a totality as the Subject has to deal not only with its neighbour (Other), but also with the “other” who exists beside the neighbour. This implies that “the ‘I’ is in relationship with a human totality” (Levinas 1987: 33) but not a totality of a unity.

Levinas (1981: 158) argues that the third party is the “other” that I am called upon to serve too. He is a neighbour of my neighbour. This one, in some way disturbs the relation that I have with the Other. As soon as he/she enters into the picture, my responsibility is divided up (Peperzak 1993: 229). Hence, the third party in Levinas fulfils two functions. Firstly, he/she reminds me (Subject) that my responsibility to the Other should be extended to others, and secondly, he/she gives me some latitude to recuperate from the infinite responsibility I have for the Other. I shall argue that, there is a tension between these two roles. I now proceed to discuss these two roles.

According to Levinas, the relation with the Other is not exclusive. Together with the Other, the Subject is obligated to the third party. The third party for Levinas is all the “others” who are present in the face¹⁰ of the Other, the face that confronts and calls the being of the Subject into question. So, the third party is not there merely by accident. Levinas presents the Other (*Autrui*) as other, perfect and somewhat distant to the Subject. According to Levinas, “the third party is the free being whom I can harm by exerting coercion on his freedom” (Levinas 1987: 37). The third party seems to be more vulnerable

¹⁰ The “Face” is one of the most powerful metaphors that Levinas uses to speak about the irreducible character of the human Other (*Autrui*). The Other like a face speaks to the Subject in a personal and intimate way. The face, at the same time, projects a gaze that overwhelms and makes demands of the Subject. So, its presence is also intimidating. Levinas' attraction to the metaphor of the face is due to the fact that the face, contrary to an empirical object, presents itself, speaks and hence cannot be objectified. The face calls the Subject into dialogue. Thus, in general, the face has a double character: As that fragile part of the body, it is vulnerable and weak, and as such, calls for help. But the face can also command or obligate me against my will, as when the face of a poor person begging for money from me, makes me feel guilty when I don't respond favourably. But according to Levinas, the face commands without authority. [For more details, see section III (“Exteriority and the Face”) in *Totality and Infinity*].

than the Other. Because of his/her vulnerability, the third party interrupts the relation of the Subject with the Other (Levinas 1969: 195). Levinas contends that, with the presence of the third party, the Subject is faced with the possibility of choice. The Subject needs to do some *calculus*, to compare and judge in order to determine for itself who is in more need than the other. The responsibility to the Other is now extended to the third party. The introduction of the “third party”, therefore necessitates a passage to justice (Levinas 1981: 16 / Levinas 1987: 202) which in turn calls into place the political state, with its juridical institutions and bill of rights. This means that the entry of the third party makes thematisation and assembling necessary, as the Subject has to share itself with all others.

The order of justice, which is brought about by the entrance of the third Other does not annul the responsibility that the Subject has toward the Other. Levinas warns that justice, which reduces all to sameness, must not make us forget the uniqueness of the Other. He contends that there is danger in justice, for it covers up uniqueness with generality (Levinas 1998: 196). This leaves us with a question: how does responsibility (which Levinas also calls love) coexist with justice? Levinas emphasises that justice comes from love, and that love as originary, must watch over justice (Levinas 1998: 108). He contends that in the *Talmudic* language God is the place where justice and love (mercy) meet (Levinas 1998: 108). Thus, although God in Judaism is perceived as a God of justice, He is however experienced as being merciful as well. He therefore transcends justice. Thus, Levinasian responsibility transcends justice but without annulling it.

RECUPERATING SUBJECT

Since the third party makes the establishment of a society possible, the Subject may understand, and even treat itself as being equal to all others. As one among equals, the Subject has the right and privilege to be at the receiving end of responsibility or love. The Subject becomes one of the many, who are neighbours to the Other (Levinas 1981: 158-161). With the advent of the third party, the infinite responsibility that the subject has toward the Other, lends itself to *calculus*. With the presence of the third party, Levinas seems to suggest that we are all equally responsible for one another. This gives the Subject a chance to recuperate. Thus, the entry of the third party is for Levinas “an incessant correction of the asymmetry of the proximity in which the face is looked at” (Levinas 1981: 158). However, Levinas insists that the correction of the asymmetry between the Subject and the Other

does not dissolve this relationship between them. The reason that Levinas gives for the importance of maintaining the relation with the Other is that “my relationship with the Other as neighbour gives meaning to my relations with all others” (Levinas 1981: 159). Here, Levinas presents the Other as a condition that makes possible an ethical relationship with others (third party).

CRITICAL REMARKS

There are some ambiguities, as to whether the entry of the third party annuls the asymmetry between the Other and the Subject. In other words, it is rather doubtful if the presence of the third party really recuperates the Subject. First, it is clear that the entry of the third party renders the Subject as one among others, who is to be served also. It would seem that the engagement of the third party and the Other affords the Subject the chance to rest. But second, it would also seem that the presence of the third party adds more load on the Subject. The Subject is now faced with many more faces to serve.

Furthermore, Levinas plunges us deeper into confusion when he maintains that “the others (third party) concern me from the first” (Levinas 1981: 159). If by “first” Levinas means “for as long as I am in relation with the Other”, then, one cannot distinguish between “my relation with the Other (*autrui*)” and “my relation with the third party”. It would seem that Levinas annuls the infinite relation with the Other, without annulling it. This is even more evident when he contends that the entry of the third party is not an empirical fact (Levinas 1981: 158). Thus, it seems we are back to square one, where the Subject is infinitely responsible for the Other irrespective of whether there is a third party or not.

Another problematic issue associated with the “third party” is Levinas’ construal of the concept “Other”. An impression is created here that the Other is just one fixity in direct contact with the self, and that Others (third party) do not exist until this fixity is pierced by the third party. I think we should rather see the others (third party) as always ontological and contemporaneously present with the Other, lest the Other and others are seen as emanating from two different ontologies.

However, notwithstanding some ambiguities, Levinas’ thought has struck a chord with certain elements of post-colonial discourse. His conception of subjectivity as responsibility has a significant appeal to the marginalised, the poor and the excluded people of the world. It is no wonder that his philosophy has influenced and is continuing to

influence a movement called the “Philosophy of Liberation”, especially the type that emanates from Latin America. Levinas himself acknowledged this influence. When asked what he thought about efforts to bring his thoughts to Latin America, he responded as follows:

I knew Dussel, who used to quote me a lot, and who is now much closer to political, even geopolitical thought. Moreover, I have gotten to know a very sympathetic South American group that is working out a ‘liberation philosophy’ – Scannone in particular... I am very happy, very proud even, when I find reflections of my work in this group. It is a fundamental approval. It means that some people have seen ‘the same thing’ (Levinas 1998: 119).

Philosophy of Liberation, like Theology of Liberation, accords a privileged place to the excluded people, and criticises discourses that legitimise current hegemonic systems or ideologies. According to Morkovsky (1998: 483-484), the general characteristics of Philosophy of Liberation are the following:

- 1) Acknowledging the importance of people excluded from systems and thinking with them communally rather than individualistically.
- 2) Developing metaphysical and epistemological categories rooted in liberating praxis, grounding theory in transformative activity.
- 3) Attempting to change relationships to create more just societies guided by a utopian vision of a future common good.

In concord with Morkovsky, Dussel (1985: 14) describes Philosophy of Liberation thus:

[A] philosophy of liberation is rising from the periphery, from the oppressed, from the shadow that the light of Being has not been able to illumine. Our thoughts set out from non-Being, nothingness, otherness, exteriority, the mystery of no-sense.

However, Philosophy of Liberation borrows its method of social analysis from Marxism. Like Marxism, it seeks to integrate “knowing” and “doing” in one’s daily living (Morkovsky 1998:

488). It is because of its concern with the Other whom concretely speaking, Levinas refers to as the poor and the marginalised, that Levinas' philosophy appeals to the Philosophy of Liberation. Nonetheless, I think it requires another study to show the extent to which Levinas' philosophy, especially his conception of subjectivity as responsibility, influenced Philosophy of Liberation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I explored Levinas' conception of responsibility as a mode through which subjectivity can and must be described. I have presented this conception of subjectivity as a reaction, but essentially as an alternative view of subjectivity, different from what Levinas labels as "egology" in Western Philosophy. I have shown that for Levinas responsibility is pre-original and as such precedes both the Self and the Other. Because of this, responsibility cannot be assumed. Its time falls out of phase with my time. The Subject, which, in modernity emerged as the principle (*archè*) and ground for all that *is*, is paralysed by responsibility with which it is thrown. Paradoxically, responsibility is a way of respond-*ing* to the Other. It is a paradox because one responds to what cannot be re-presented or assembled before oneself. In responsibility, the *cogito* has no *cogitatum*, and yet it continues *to respond*, in obedience to the "unknown". A more radical manner of describing the "responsible Subject" was when Levinas introduced the notion of "substitution". To be a Subject is to *be* for the Other. Levinas used the following compound word, "one-for-the-Other". To *be* for the Other involves being ready to die for them. Cain, in the Old Testament Bible clearly exhibits an attitude quite opposite to what Levinas means by readiness to die for another. According to Levinas, Cain's response to the question "where is your brother?" (after which his response was "Am I my brother's keeper?") implies that "I am *I*" and "he is *he*". This means that "we are separate beings who have nothing to do with each other". What is lacking in Cain's response is ethics. Herein, there is only ontology (Levinas 1998: 110).

Levinas also attempted to neutralise his notion of "infinite responsibility" by introducing the notion of "third party". The entry of the "third party" had two repercussions: Firstly, it opened the private dialogue or "love affair" of the Subject and the Other to the public. Politics was born as the many "others" emerged as claimants of responsibility. Secondly, the Subject seems to have been allowed to rest from the infinity of

responsibility. In our exposition of Levinas' conception of responsibility, we have also uncovered some problems and ambiguities which remain unsolved. For instance, the absolutisation of the concept of "Other" has been shown as a stumbling block for the Subject to heed the call to be responsible for the Other. Furthermore, we have shown that by introducing the notion of the "third party," Levinas did not help to reduce the "load" on the shoulders of the Subject. Instead, the responsibility of the Subject toward the Other seems to have been multiplied.

Levinasian conception of "responsibility" leaves thought perplexed if not paralysed. I concur with Derrida (1978: 82), who regards Levinas' thought in general, as a thought that "can make us tremble." Levinas' conception of responsibility certainly gives rise to thought. It challenges our understanding of subjectivity, especially the one that emphasises independence, self-development and autonomy, and opens another perspective in which the Subject is ready to sacrifice its freedom for the good of the Other. Furthermore, Levinas' conception of subjectivity makes possible human solidarity, cooperation and dialogue in our global world. Philosophy of Liberation from Latin America finds solace in Levinas' challenging thoughts.

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