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From the Ontological Subject to the Ethical "I"

Abstract

This study focuses on Emmanuel Levinas's ethical metaphysics, which gives priority to ethics over traditional Western philosophical approaches that begin first with ontology, the knowledge of being. Because ontology, as knowledge or the theory of being, includes an epistemology at the beginning, and every question about being requires an epistemology, Levinas's conception of ontology cannot be separated from its epistemological implications. By all means, the Levinasian critique of Western philosophy is not merely a critique and an analysis of ontology and epistemology in a neutral style, but it shows that every ontological question about being fails to recognize the very ethical relation and depends upon an egoistic relation of the Self to the Other. According to Levinas, based upon human reason, the ontological or epistemological approaches of Western philosophy have not only failed to recognize the Other but reduced the Other to the Self. Contrary to Western philosophical approaches, Levinas finds the possibility of real ethical relation to the Other in the *face-to-face* relationship with the Other, in which the face of the Other awakens the Self.

Key Words

The Other, Ethical Metaphysics, Levinas, the Violence of Metaphysics, Ontological Imperialism, the Face of the Other, the *Face-toFace* Relation, Ontological Subject, Ethical 'I'.

Ontolojik Özneden Etik "Ben"e

Özet

Bu çalı ma, hareket noktası olarak öncelikle ontolojiyi, yani varlı ın bilgisini alan geleneksel Batı felsefesine ait yakla ımlar kar ısında, eti e öncelik tanıyan Levinas'ın etik metafizi ine odaklanmaktadır. Varlı ın bilgisi veya teorisi olarak ontoloji, daha ba langıcında, bir epistemoloji içerdi inden ve varlık hakkındaki her soru turma bir epistemolojiyi gerektirdi inden dolayı, Levinas'ın ontoloji kavrayı ı da epistemolojik imalarından ayrılamaz. üphesiz ki, Levinas'ın Batı felsefesi ele tirisi sadece tarafsız bir tarz içerisinde gerçekle tirilen bir ontoloji ve epistemoloji analizi veya ele tirisi de ildir, fakat o, varlı a dair her ontolojik soru turmanın, hakiki etik ili kiyi takdir etmede ba arısızlı a u radı ını ve Benin

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Ötekine yönelik egoistik ili kisine dayandı ını göstermeye matuftur. Levinas'a gore, Batı felsefesinin, insan aklına dayanan ontolojik veya epistemolojik yakla ım tarzları, sadece Ötekini takdir etmede ba arısızlı a u ramazlar, fakat aynı zamanda Ötekini Ben'e ındirgerler. Batının felsefî yakla ımlarına kar ıt bir biçimde, Levinas, Ötekiyle kurulacak olan gerçek etik ili kinin imkânını, Ötekinin yüzünün Beni ayıltıp, farkına varmasını sa ladı ı, Ötekiyle gerçekle tirilen yüz-yüze ili ki içerisinde bulur.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Öteki, Etik Metafizik, Levinas, Metafizi in iddeti, Ontolojik Emperyalizm, Ötekinin Yüzü, Yüz-Yüze li ki, Ontolojik Özne, Etik Ben.

Introduction

Many of the important issues in contemporary philosophy evolve around the ethical and political debates in which the concepts of identity and difference have become the main problem of philosophy. If we want to find a reason for this situation, then it is necessary to analyze briefly the philosophical and socio-cultural background of the contemporary age and contemporary philosophy. This study on Levinas presents such a philosophical background.

According to some prominent thinkers, Western philosophy has been from the beginning a human/subject centered activity. The centrality of the human/subject gave human the possibility to define everything from their own epistemological point of view. The question of classical philosophy (ontology) has been "what is this?". In such a point of view, the epistemological subject has reduced his/her own research topic to the object and gave it some epistemological category that removes its differences for the sake of sameness or unity. Thus the Other or the object of ethical philosophy lost its original identity and differences. This means that, in classical philosophy, the ethical concepts have not been based upon the ethical, but ontological ground.

By the same token, it can be argued that Levinas's critique of ontology and epistemology, as connected to these debates, corresponds to a philosophy that gives priority to the Other over the Same and to difference over identity. This paper investigates Levinas's critique of Western philosophy, defined as a philosophy or knowledge of being in which the Other loses his/her very difference for the sake of the Same. According to Levinas, depending upon the ontology of being, the dominant philosophical approach in the Western philosophical tradition points out an ontological imperialism that destroys the difference and radical alterity of the Other. On the other hand, Levinas's own philosophy can be seen as an ethical metaphysics that strives against the philosophical approaches that try to reduce differences of the Other to the Same. In this context, it can be said that Levinas finds the possibility of such an ethical metaphysics in changing the relationship between the Self and the Other, where the Self's radical responsibility for the Other appears when the Self encounters the Other face-to-face.

Why Ethics rather than Ontology

Levinas dedicated the main body of his philosophical and theological writings to ethics rather than ontology or epistemology. To comprehend Levinas's emphasis on ethics, his critique of the Western philosophical tradition, in which the main research subject has been the concept or the knowledge of being, must first be understood. According to Levinas, the philosophy of the West, that is, ontology, strives to dissolve meaning in totality and to reduce irreducible alterity of transcendence to an encompassing ontological ground. This issue gains the clearest form from the perspective of Greek ontology, which seeks to define truth in unity. According to the Greek ontology, the last word is a unity, as a uniting truth that combines the plural appearances of beings in a synthesis. For example, as Levinas stated, Plato evaluates love as quasi-divine owing to the fact that love does not unite differences in a synthetical truth. On the contrary, Levinas argues that difference is a more suitable concept than totality to explain the individual's ethical relationship with the Other (Levinas 1995: 187-188).

From this starting point, for Levinas, who argues that the concept of *totality* has developed in Western philosophy as a consequence of the demand for unity, the individual has undertaken the meaning by means of totality. Thus, the concept of totality has determined the understanding of the Western philosophy about the Other. In this philosophy, every attempt to understand the Other has destroyed the radical differences of the Other, combining and joining him/her to the Same. Accordingly, for Levinas, this is the ontological imperialism of Western philosophy. As a philosophy of power, it can only exist by transforming the Other into the Same. Levinas states that ontological imperialism results from the notion of the ontological subject (Sarup 1996: 68).

The notion of the ontological subject is based upon Western metaphysical thought, specifically, the concept of *logos* in the meaning of thinking and speaking, that is to say, the Greek concept of truth. For this reason, Levinas attempts primarily to determine the distinctive characteristics of Greek philosophical language. Accordingly, if the essence of the Greek philosophical language is taken into consideration, truth is a *present* or *co-present* thing that is gathered or brought into being in totality, which can be called "world" or *"cosmos"*. Thus, in the context of the Greek model, truth is a *presentable* and *re-presentable* thing in an eternal now and here. To associate truth with presence in that way means that truth and presence can be equivalent to and identified with one another, thereby reducing being to presence (Levinas 1995: 184-185). By means of this reduction, philosophy aims to establish a first cause, an absolute beginning point in an ontological ground that can explain everything and to make it understandable to dissolve it in totality. It is obvious that this ontological ground has some ethical implications for dissolving differences in the Same. Therefore, Levinas regards Western philosophy as a philosophy that destroys the otherness of the Other, revealing it as a being:

> Western philosophy coincides with the unveiling of the Other where the Other in showing itself as being, loses its otherness. From its infancy, philosophy has been filled with the horror of the Other which remains Other, an almost incurable

allergy to it. It is because of this that it is essentially a philosophy of being, that the comprehension of being is its last word and the fundamental structure of man. It is for that reason also that it becomes a philosophy of immanence and autonomy, or atheism. (Levinas 1966b: 35)

For this reason, Levinas often emphasizes the importance of the essential relation between metaphysics and ontology and states that "metaphysics precedes ontology". Although metaphysical desire can be seen as the essence of theory, Levinas distinguishes metaphysics from ontology and theory of knowledge. Of course, this is contrary to the dominant philosophical approach in Western thought, which identifies ontology with metaphysics. In his own ethical metaphysics, ontology is defined as "a reduction of the Other to the Same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being." By so doing, ontology seems to be promoting freedom as an identification of the Same. In fact, by reducing the Other to the Same, the very differences of the Other are destroyed (Levinas 1969: 184-185). Seen from this perspective, it is possible to say that Western philosophy delimits the otherness of the Other, defining him/her within the epistemological boundaries of the subject, thus not permitting him/her to define him/herself as he/she is. As stated in terms of the Derridaen reading of Levinas, this is what may be called the violence of metaphysics (Derrida 1980: 79-154).

For Levinas, Socrates's teaching of the primacy of the Same exemplifies this attitude, according to which the ultimate meaning of freedom is the permanence of the Same, which is reason. Neutralizing and encompassing the Other, reason has been considered the manifestation of freedom in Western philosophy. In this way, the Other has lost his/her meaning and has been reduced to the Same as a theme or an object of the thinking subject (Levinas 1969: 43). Levinas underlines the ontological or reason-centered character of the relation to the Other through all of Western philosophy as the main reason of not comprehending the ethical signification of the Other. Because of the focus on comprehension of its own research subjects, Western philosophy has found signification for other beings on the basis or horizon of being. Thus, it has not succeeded in invoking the other beings, but only named and defined them, causing them violence and a negation. In Levinasian terms, however, this attitude, in which violence and negation is put into practice, is, in fact, a denial of the independence of the Other (Levinas 1996: 9).

In a similar way, Levinas criticizes the synthetic activity of understanding, which reduces the Same and the Other to a third term and misses their very differences. According to Levinas, although "the *relation* between the Same and the Other is language," these terms are not limitrophe within this relationship accomplished by language, for in this kind of relation to the Same, the Other does not lose his/her own differences but remains transcendent to the Same. Again, in this kind of relation, the Other and the Same do not form a totality in which the Other originates in the I. The terms meet within a *face-to-face* relationship and their diversity is not reducible to the synthetic activity of understanding (Levinas 1969: 39). The question of "why language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation?" finds an answer at this

point. This relation, which is created in language, must be seen as the revelation of the Other:

> In this revelation only can language as a system of signs be constituted. The other called upon is not something represented, is not a given, is not a particular, through on side already open to generalization. Language, far from presupposing universality and generality, first make them possible. Language presupposes interlocutors, a plurality. Their commerce is not a representation of the one by the other, nor a participation in universality, on the common plane of language. Their commerce …. is ethical. (Levinas 1969: 73)

The Levinasian insistence on ethics gains absolute meaning in this conception of language. In fact, Levinasian ethics can be seen as a *post-onto-theo-logic* ethics. The possibility of such an ethics depends upon releasing the *onto-theo-logical* style of thought. From the Levinasian point of view, the critique of metaphysics does not mean the end of ethics, but "the onto-theo-logical ethics, the ethics of transcendent sanction, of other worldly principles and rules." Beyond the *onto-theo-logical* language of thought, a new and true ethics can appear as "a metaphysical responsibility, an exorbitant and infinite responsibility for other human beings, to care not for being for the unraveling of its plot, but for what is beyond and against being, the alterity of the other person." (Cohen 2006: 3-4) By means of the end of *onto-theo-logy*, ethics transforms its traditional meaning, which is "a simple moralism of rules which decree what is virtuous," for the sake of an ethics that "is the original awakening of an I responsible for the other; the accession of my person to the uniqueness of the I called and elected to responsibility for the other." (Levinas 2001a: 182) In this sense, ethical relation is defined as having a what Levinas calls, non-allergic relation to the Other that "is not reducible to maieutics"; as a teaching, "it comes from exterior" and brings to the Self more than the Self contains. The very epiphany of the face is produced in this non-violent transitivity (Levinas 1969: 51).

There is a relationship between the Levinasian ethical subject and the Other. However, compared with Western philosophy, this kind of relation respects the heterogeneity of the Other. (Sarup 1996: 68) In this ethical manner, "the Other is neither someone who can be thematized, nor the object of positivist ontology. Rather, for Levinas, the Other is precisely the unthematizable, the noncorrelative, and the unutterable trace that calls the subject into being through the ethical relation of facing." (Sarancino 2004: 73) In a similar vein, the ethical I is a subject who recognizes the radical differences of the Other and does not strive to assimilate the Other. Likewise, he/she is a subject who esteems the value of difference in itself and does not descend into the ontological imperialism of the Same. Therefore, what is important for Levinas is to find a place where the perspective of the horizon of being or *onto-theo-logical* perspective is not interested in the human being. The only possibility of being a being can be found in a relation where the beings can speak with one another as equal partners. This being is a human being to whom another human being can have access by means of encountering him/her as a face (Levinas 1996: 8).

The Face of the Other as a Ground of Levinasian Ethical Metaphysics

The constant theme of Emmanuel Levinas's whole intellectual endeavor is the search for the idea of a Good beyond being. As stated by Burggraeve, the Levinasian perspective finds the idea of a Good in our relation to the Other.

What is the idea of a Good? A Levinasian perspective answers this question "as the 'an-archic' fundamental condition in which we find ourselves as subject, and which we also discover through the ethical appeal to an unconditional responsibility that the face of the other awakens in us by its appearance as 'the poor, widow and the orphan': awakening of the I by the other." (Burggraeve 2002: 37-38) This interpretation allows us to conclude that the Levinasian ethics presupposes the kind of relationship in which the Self cannot be indifferent to the Other.

The ground of this relationship with the Other is a relation of love that requires suspension of the natural ego in favor of the Other, in the manner of giving priority to ethics. As Levinas puts it, "the spiritual is no longer reduced to an event of pure 'knowledge' but would be the transcendence of the relation with someone, with another: love, friendship, sympathy." (Levinas 2001b: 201) This kind of understanding of relationships takes for granted that the entity does not survive alone and does not find any meaning in the ontology of the Same. So, Levinasian ethics is an ethics in which the right of the Other to exist as a genuine other precedes the right of the Self. This brings out the ethics-ego and ethics-nature contradictions. To give precedence to the ego or nature will pave the way for the violence of the Self or the ego. Contrary to this understanding, by emphasizing the necessity and priority of the Other over the Self, ethics inhibits the Self's violence towards the Other. Realizing this prohibition is possible only if the priority of the Other is recognized, granted, and activated by another being beyond the natural. In this sense, the ethical situation is a human situation through which the idea of God comes to mind. Thus, according to Levinas, God is the Other who inverts the meaning of our nature and makes our ontological will of existence disputable (Levinas 1995: 190). In a similar vein, "just as the idea of Infinite surpasses the Cartesian thought, so too, an Other is out of proportion with the power and freedom of the I. The disproportion between an Other and the I is precisely the moral consciousness. The moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to external being, to experience." (Levinas 1966a: 32)

Contrary to the metaphysical understanding of difference, Levinas offers a kind of ethical thought that depends upon the principle of "irreducibility of the Other". In this sense, Levinas states that God is the absolute Other and going to God is not understood in the terms of classical ontology that understands this going as turning to God who is the Beginning or/and End of the temporary existence. Going to God must be understood primarily in terms of going to the Other. For this very reason, the criterion of going to God is being worried about the Other and concerned with him/her in an ethical manner. Consequently, by necessity of being responsible ethically for the Other, it will be possible to be freed from the bondage of the natural world and to think of the Other as irreducible to a mere being, undermining the ontological priority of the meaning of the being and natural and political definitions based on this perception (Levinas 1995: 188-189).

At this point, the Levinasian emphasis on the concept of *the face*, the face of the Other, and the I-thou relation become important, for the face opens a different kind of ethical relationship between the ethical subject and the Other. It is not the egoistic or epistemological subject that determines the essence of this relationship, but the Other. Levinas thinks that "access to face is straightaway ethical." (Levinas 2006a: 85) By emphasizing ethics as a first philosophy (Levinas 1989: 75-87), Levinas wants to avoid the dominant philosophical approach since Plato, in which the sensation of the particular is subject to knowledge of the universal, the Other to the Same, "relation between beings to structures of being, metaphysics to ontology, the existentiell to existential." (Levinas 1996: 5) Contrary to such a philosophical perspective, Levinas finds the possibility of an ethics that goes beyond ontology and epistemology in the face of the Other. Although the face of the Other has physical appearances like an object, encountering the Other in *the-face-to-face relation*, the face of the Other is irreducible to our perception about the Other. "The face is signification, and signification without context... The face is meaning all by itself." (Levinas 2006a: 85-86) In this encounter, "the visage of an Other puts in question the happy spontaneity of the I, the joyous force which goes of its own accord." (Levinas 1966a: 32) As Levinas stated, the face of the Other transcends and forces me to realize an ethical relation with him/her:

> The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic images it leaves me, the existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum*-the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities. … *It expresses itself.* The face brings a Notion of truth which, in contradistinction to contemporary ontology, is not the disclosure of an impersonal Neuter, but *expression*: the existent breaks through all the envelopings and generalities of Being to spread out in its 'form' the totality of its 'content,' finally abolishing the distinction between form and content. (Levinas 1969: 50-51)

Consequently, for Levinas, the notion of face opens a very different perspective from the egoistic approach of the dominant philosophy. First, the face of the Other has the possibility of bringing a notion of meaning that gives priority to the Other over the Self's *Sinngebung* and is independent of the initiative and power of the Self. Furthermore, the notion of face accentuates "the philosophical priority of existent over Being." This means that, in Levinas's philosophy, exteriority, or the Other, "is not reducible to the interiority of memory", or the Self. (Levinas 1969: 51)

Levinas also directs our attention to the intersubjective character of *the-face-to-face relationship*. For Levinas, this relationship is "a sort of nonrelation in practice, but a relation nevertheless in the saying." The importance of *the face-to-face relationship* reveals itself at this point, for *the-face-to-face encounter* resists uniting the Self and the Other into a single and encompassing concept of relation. As Lumsden stated, in *the face-to-face relationship* "the infinite status of the Other disrupts its containment in a concept that could possibly unite I and Other." Accordingly, against the philosophical conception of the Other in Western thought, Levinas stresses that any thematization

necessarily involves "the third party" and "cannot contain the Other as face". As the actual experience of face reveals, the face has a 'non-conceptual truth' and because in *the face-to-face encounter* the Other has an immediate relation, this immediacy transcends what can be said of the face of the Other. (Lumsden 2000: 235)

On the other hand, speaking of the principle of reciprocity is not possible in this intersubjective relation because this relation is non-symmetrical and the Self is responsible to the Other without waiting for reciprocity. (Levinas 2006b: 98) Similarly, when considered from the Levinasian point of view, it is possible to say that the irreducible and ultimate experience of the relationship can be found in *the face-to-face encounter* of humans, not found in synthesis. According to Levinas, "it must be understood that morality comes not as a secondary layer, above an abstract reflection on the totality and its dangers; morality has an independent and primary range. First philosophy is an ethics." (Levinas 2006c: 77)

Seen from this perspective, it is safe to argue that the relationship between human beings, as developed by Levinas, has an essentially non-synthesizable character. True union or togetherness between human beings is not a "togetherness of synthesis, but togetherness of face-to-face", in which the Other and the Self realize an ethical relationship with one another but do not lose their own differences. (Levinas 2006c: 77) This is because, in direct relation to the Other, the Self does not thematize the Other and does not regard him/her as a known object (Levinas 2006d: 57). On the contrary, Levinas considers the Self-Other relation as a plurality of infinite subjects and does not reduce their plurality to a "we". As Lumsden puts it, "it is important to note however that these subjects so conceived are not complete and self-identical, they are rather characterized by the type of insufficiency of the Fichtean subject. They are incomplete and exceed themselves in the necessity of their responsibility for the Other." (Lumsden 2000: 235)

Conclusion

In this study, we have tried to argue that Western ontology does not provide a comprehensive ethical position in which a real ethical relationship with the Other can be established without removing the otherness of the Other. In European philosophy, one of the most valuable criticisms of this Western ontology has been elaborated by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas, as a European thinker, simply but sharply criticizes the Western and European perception of the Other as a metaphysical violence or ontological imperialism over the Other. This is so, according to Levinas, because the humanistic or epistemological perspectives of Western metaphysical thought have attempted to separate human being or epistemological subject from the Other, giving the Other secondary importance, leading to the eventual removal of the otherness of the Other. In other words, Western ontology produces a perception of otherness in which the Other is assimilated into the sameness of the epistemological subject. What Levinas wants to accomplish is to distinguish ethics from ontology. Levinasian ethics is situated in an "encounter" with the Other that cannot be reduced to a symmetrical "relationship". He believes that a pre-ontological ethics has to be established in order to have a real ethical philosophy. A relationship with a mortal being can be ethical only when and if it allows

the Other to live and not only does it not leave the Other alone in his/her death but also includes 'dying' for the sake of the Other, sacrificing the Self for the Other, or taking the Other's place in his/her death (Direk 2005: 32).

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