

The Self and the Other in the Philosophy of Levinas

Levinas Felsefesinde Ben ve Başkası

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Abstract: In Levinas' philosophy the concept of the Self occupies a quite significant place. In this respect the unfolding of the appearances of the Other sets the objective and the scope of this paper. The fundamental relationship between the Self and the Other is grounded on ethics since, unlike in Western Philosophy, it is ethics rather than ontology that is the base of Levinas's philosophy. His framework can be considered a critique of the perspective which approaches the issue from its ontology identifying the Self with the Other. Therefore, breaking ties with tradition becomes possible only in the language. Accordingly, the crucial theme of the Levinas' philosophy is the ethical language that presents itself in the ethical relationship with the Other. The relationship of responsibility between the Self and the Other is unconditional, infinite, and non-reciprocal, and tracing back the source of this relationship is not possible since this relationship is contained in infinity itself. Diachrony which breaks the identity of the Self refers to the eternalization of responsibility. The paper also reveals the fact that Levinas himself also falls into the trap of the logic of identification in Western metaphysics in the discussion of whether responsibility of the self stems from free will or from infinity. In that, the obligation of the Other in the face of the impotence of the Self eliminates the freedom of the Other and entails responsibility towards the Self. Hence, this results in the identification of the differences of the Other to be dissolved in the Self itself. Thus, this paper aims at foregrounding the differences between the Self and the Other.

Keywords: The Other, The Self, Identical, Ethics, Responsibility

Öz: Levinas felsefesinin önemli kavramı olan ben kavramından hareketle başkalık ve aynılık problemi açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Levinas'ta ben ve başkası arasındaki temel ilişki etik üzerine kurulmuştur. Çünkü Levinas felsefesinde Batı felsefesinden farklı olarak varlığın temelini ontoloji değil, etik oluşturur. Ona göre, ontoloji üzerinden hareket ettiğimizde ben ve başkası aynılaştırılmış olur. Bundan dolayı gelenekten kopuş, ancak dil düzleminde gerçekleşebilir. Levinas, felsefesi özellikle başkası'yla etik ilişkide açığa çıkan etiksel dil üzerine odaklanır. Ben ve başkası arasındaki sorumluluk ilişkisi koşulsuz, sınırsız ve tek yönlüdür. Bu ilişkinin kaynağını bulmak ise mümkün değildir. Bu ilişki sonsuzluğu kendi içerisinde barındırır. Ben'in kendisiyle olan özdeşliğini kıran art zamanlılık sorumluluğunun sonsuzlaşması anlamına gelir. Tüm bunlardan hareketle ben ve başkası arasındaki farklılıkların ön plana çıkartılması amaçlanmıştır. Son olarak ise, ben'in sorumluluğunun özgür bilincine mi, yoksa sonsuz'a mı dayandığı tartışılarak, aslında Levinas'ın çok eleştirmiş olduğu Batı metafiziğindeki aynılaştırma mantığının içerisine düştüğünü görürüz. Çünkü başkası'nın, ben'in acizliği karşısındaki mecburiyeti, başkası'nın özgürlüğünü ortadan kaldırır ve ben'e karşı sorumluluğunu zorunlu kılar. Bu ise başkası'nın farklılıklarının ben içerisinde eritilerek aynılaştırılmasına neden olur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Başkası, Ben, Aynı, Etik, Sorumluluk

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Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas, the leading philosopher of ethics bases his philosophy upon the nature of the relationship between the individual himself and *the others* since in order to unfold one's *self*, the dialog between *the self* and *the Other* is quite significant. Herein, he stresses the secondary position of *the Other* resulting from presentation of Western philosophy itself as an ontology (Corvellec 2005, 3). Although Western philosophy, in principle, aims at unfolding *the Other*, during the process, *the Other* loses its *otherness* since it unfolds itself as another being (Gözel 2005, 123). Levinas bases his philosophy on this, explicitly implemented on *the Other* as a central issue in the Western philosophy, and he places ethics as the first philosophy by putting the responsibility towards *the Other* on this basis since a human life can only be possible by realizing *the Other* (Gibson 1999, 202).

Husserl and Heidegger's influence on Levinas

Levinas is entirely the philosopher of *the Other*. When *the otherness* is unnoticed, it is impossible for us to grasp the nature of his philosophy. In order to explain Levinas's concept of *the Other*, firstly attention should be paid to his phenomenology in which the influences of Husserl and Heidegger cannot be ignored. He clearly admits their contributions in realizing a phenomenology (Gözel 2005, 129-130). Husserlian phenomenology methodologically explains how meaning appears while we comprehend our intentional relation to the world. Therefore, phenomenology profoundly studies all sciences, and it searches for their essence (Husserl 1982).

Although the significance of Husserlian philosophy for Levinas is an undeniable fact, the fundamental influence in the formation of his philosophical thinking refers to Heidegger. According to Levinas, it is impossible to engage in serious philosophy without following the way of Heidegger one way or *the Other* (Levinas 2006, 51-52). My claims are, that it is an incontrovertible fact that Levinas philosophy is based upon Husserlian philosophy, but also, that the main effect in the formation of his philosophy is Heidegger's philosophy. According to Levinas, it isn't possible for there to be a serious philosophy without proceeding this or that way from Heidegger's way (Levinas 1979, 42-47). In the section on Heidegger, Levinas states:

Heidegger too formulated the first contraction of being with others as a substitution. To discover another Dasein is not to perceive him, that is, to objectify him; it is to take him precisely as another Dasein, like oneself, and this is effected in a virtual seeing the world from the Da, putting oneself in that place. But the other is conceived by Heidegger as another Dasein – another locus from which the world comes into view. Through the substitution the world-for-me becomes the world. But the world is the world from the first; from the first the world-for-me is a profile or a perspective on the world. Then from the start I am another one, locus of a clearing of the world that from the start has its equivalentents (Levinas 2006, XXIX).

Heidegger especially emphasizes *Dasein's* temporal and historical existence. Heidegger further tried to enter being (*Sein*) towards a method for the phenomenological. The examination apropos the temporal and historical, of human existence (*Dasein*). Heidegger says that *Dasein* is basically for being, and it plans its being at the time of different potential. Existence accordingly means the phenomenon of the future. In the world, the space for potential is anyway limited. *Dasein* exists in the middle of beings, so that the middle of beings are both in existence and not in existence. Correspondingly, the *Dasein* is not temporal for the absolute reason that it exists in

time. On account of this its being is ingrained in temporality: the original unity of the future, the past and the present. It is an activity over a world as a scope of potential (Heidegger 1962, 59). Similar to Husserl who claims that notions are meaningless by themselves without phenomenology, Heidegger also affirms that *Dasein* cannot have meaning independent of time. Levinas says that:

The self is a sub-jectum; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything. The unity of the universe is not what my gaze embraces in its unity of apperception, but what is incumbent on me from all sides, regards me in the two senses of the term, accuses me, is my affair (Levinas 2006, 116).

The self as an atonement is antecedent to activity and passivity so that *the Self* that is *Dasein* arises when it is integrated with reality (Levinas 2006, 116). *Dasein* doesn't have an abstract meaning without reality, for this reason Levinas points to the concept of *the Other* altering in time and in the historical process. Otherwise, *the Other* disappears within *the identical* which refers to *the Other* in *the identical* in Levinas philosophy (Lingis 2010, 308-315).

The Analysis of Dasein

The statement that "*Dasein is a being for whom, in his being, his own being is at stake*" is a tempting statement in *Being and Time* (Levinas 2000, 25). According to Heidegger, indeed the *conatus* is concluded from the degree of his being clearly a compulsory being itself. For this reason, we cannot claim that there is an existentialism here because the *conatus* adjusts his subjection to being which man is interesting in, as well as he has been compulsory or compelled to being. The condition of being is to such a degree his own, that the meaning of being is his condition (Levinas 2000, 25). The analytic of *Dasein* is a level a long time ago which is taken inclusive of the description of being. *Being and Time* is not only a preparation for ontology, but also a level inclusive of ontology itself (Levinas 2000, 27).

Being is in question in *Dasein*, so that this substantiality is necessary to be *The Da*, it means there, *Dasein* is an apperception of being as a verb (Levinas 2000, 29). Moreover, human existence, that is the *Dasein*, is identified as its *Da* which is indicated to be in the world by three structures: being out ahead of oneself (the project), being always already in the world (facticity), being in the world as being alongside of (alongside of things, alongside of that which is encountered within the world) (Levinas 2000, 30). In everyday time, the unity of the "*me*" figures out when the time of each life runs out:

Dasein is total only in its necrology: "*Changed by eternity into his true Self,*" totality would be fulfilled at the very moment in which the person ceases to be a person. Heidegger writes in this regard, "*To care, such as it forms the totality of Dasein's structural whole, what is manifestly repugnant -in conformity with its ontological sense- is a possible being- whole of this being*" (Levinas 2000, 31).

We revealed that *Dasein* has ontico-ontological priority. And we might misguide the reader into if this entity must additionally make what is provided for concerning illustrating the ontico-ontologically essential is not main, in the sense that it might itself be grasped immediately. Ontically, *Dasein* will not be close to us and also *Dasein* is nothing other than us. Although this, alternately, exactly for this reason, will be ontologically that which will be most distant (Heidegger 1962, 36-37).

Identical to Being with The Other

Levinas' concept '*the Other in the identical*' both summarizes his major idea and indicates the relationship between his and Husserl's phenomenology. According to Levinas, Husserl especially focuses on and stresses the concept of *the self-identical* which coincides with itself and it isn't possible that we may comprehend Plato's realism and also what he tries to emphasize (Kosky, 2010, 239). *The self-identical* is tried to be clarified through the feeling of reality resulting from the influences of phenomenological consciousness. According to Husserl, the reality of world is not a natural, if, and only if, it is a positive reality because it is provided by consciousness. He claims that the existence which is admitted through the statement "*Cogito ergo sum*" by Descartes is not an objective existence because reaching the objective reality from "*sum*" is impossible (Descartes 1967). Besides, Descartes thought that every experience, however passive it may be, is made over a "*constitution of being*" immediately, supposing that the given were drawn from oneself or by me, so we might say that being resists in itself the possibility of idealism (Levinas, 1986, 346). Levinas also explains the idea of infinity as well:

But the relation with infinity-the idea of the Infinite, as Descartes calls it-overflows thought in a wholly different sense than does opinion. Opinion vanishes like the wind when thought touches it-or is revealed to be already within that thought. What remains ever exterior to thought is thought in the idea of infinity. It is the condition for every opinion as also for every objective truth. The idea of infinity is the mind before it lends itself to the distinction between what it discovers by itself and what it receives from opinion (Levinas 1979, 25).

The relation with infinity will have to be specified by terms aside from those of objective experience. On the other hand, if experience definitely has a relation with *the Other*, the relation with infinity is experienced successfully in the sense of the word. The production of the infinite entity is not separable from the idea of infinity, this is because the idea of infinity is the form of being, the infinity. Yet, infinity is not initial existing, after then reveals itself, whose infinity is indicated as revelation (Levinas 1979, 24-27).

According to Husserl, who intends to tailor philosophy as an objective science, efforts to provide an objective science with a natural belief in the existence of the world are futile. The first thing to be done is to question the objectivity of natural sciences which are accepted as certain, since that objectivity of natural sciences is founded on a general assertion constituted by them. Thus, since it is based on some prejudices, they are not open to discussion (Uygur 2007). Husserl indicates that the objectivity of the natural sciences alone is derived not only from themselves but also from the necessity of separating the real world from the world of scientific reality in order to reach to a certain science (Husserl 1982, 152).

Even though, the world looks as if it loses its existence, we cannot claim that it completely disappears precisely disappearing of the world because, according to Husserl, the world continues in its existence as a phenomenon after this situation (Husserl 1982, 18-19). The world as a phenomenon reflects a directly obvious and a substantial life since it is possible to have an access to the consciousness which enables us to reach the source of every knowledge and the knowing subject. That effect of consciousness on the world is a thing termed by Husserl "*the first presence*". Therefore, according to Husserl, the thing formed the content of the first presence, can only be grasped in a present which does not belong to itself anymore after it happens, only by the eclipse of reason. For this reason, he especially emphasizes that the reality

of the present can only be realized by the eclipse in reason. It shows that we can never apprehend the present solely in its absolute (Gözel 2011).

Levinas states that the first impression presented as open or closed form in Husserlian phenomenology is not a notion but life itself. Since the first impression is a thing which cannot be comprehended, it is not thinking content but it is life itself. Levinas, thus defines life as:

The permanent effort of the transcendental reduction comes down to leading “*mute consciousness*” to speech and to not taking the exercise of constituent intentionality led to speech for a being placed in the positivity of the world. The life of consciousness is excluded from it and, precisely as excluded from the positivity of the world, as a “*mute subject*,” it allows beings of the world (Levinas 1998, 68).

Essentially, Levinas passes to life notion from notion. Although Husserl agrees with the opinion at this point, Levinas’s qualification about life reveal the differentiation between Husserl and Levinas. Along with this differentiation, Levinas underlies the basics of *deconstruction* (Gözel 2011).

His perspective which sees both *identicalness* and *deconstruction* in between *the identical* and *the Other* unfolds the meaning of the concept of “*the Other in the identical*”. How could *the Other in the identical* be comprehended? In order to explain *the Other*, he mentions the conspiracy between *the Other* and *the identical*. This conspiracy reveals the fact that *the Other in the identical* already exists for the subject which enables the unfolding of its existence (Levinas 2003, 129-132). In his opinion, the conspiracy emerges at this point. With the conspiracy between *the identical* and *the Other*, *the Other* ensures its superiority over *the identical* since during this conspiracy, there happens a powerful conflict and opposition between *the Other* and *the identical* which will lead to domination of either of them over *the Other*.

One of the main problems here is how the conflict between *the identical* and *the Other* ends up in the victory of the *identical*. The relation with *the Other* has a different quality compared to the structure of intentionality. *The Other* is not only involved in the tendency of inclining. Initially, *the Other* as absolute resists the unconventionality of intentionality. In the face of this resistance, *the Other* cannot be even be transformed into the content of consciousness, and the resistance against the unconventionality of *the Other*’s intentionality destroys the dominance of *the identical* (Levinas 2003, 116-128). A substitution of me for *the others*, is then not an alienation because I exist through *the other*. Furthermore, this is my inspiration which is the psyche that can be a sign for this alterity in the same without alienation (Levinas 2006, 114-115).

Ethics as First Philosophy

What Levinas tries to point out here refers to the necessity of the direct interrogation of consciousness. Further, in reference to Aristotle, he identifies metaphysics, which he considers as “*the first philosophy*” with ethics rather than reducing it to ontology, and claims that ethics proceeds ontology. Ontology leads *the Other* to *the identical* and does not permit *the identical* to be alienated by *the Other*. Therefore, this elevates freedom standing as the identification of *the identical* (Direk 2000, 187-206). At this point, theory denies metaphysical desire and externality which reinforces it. However, the source of metaphysical desire refers to an ontological way and if it only remained as a theory, it would not make any progress. Thus, the source of metaphysical desire should be brought beyond theory and ontology by critical intentionality since, as opposed to ontology, critique does not reduce *the Other* into the identical. On the

contrary, it questions the function of *the identical* (Direk 2000). Levinas explains that:

The other metaphysically desired is not “*other*” like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this “*I*,” that “*other*”. I can “*feed*” on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other* (Levinas 1979, 33).

Apart from the singular pretension of desire cannot be clarified the customary analysis of desire, for desire comes out a being indigent and incomplete of fallen from its past grandeur. According to Levinas, the metaphysical desire doesn't long to return because it is desire for a land not of our birth so that we should never mention about ourselves. And also, the metaphysical desire has different intention. It is like goodness, but the desire cannot fulfill it; however, it has confidence in it. Therefore, Levinas especially says that desire is a desire for the definitely other and metaphysics desires the other on the further side of satisfactions (Levinas 1979, 33-34).

Levinas extends his criticisms regarding the dominance of *the Other* over *the identical* and the analysis of ontology through metaphysics against Husserl and Heidegger. He also makes reference to the tradition of Western philosophy in his criticism since he refuses the dominance of *the identical* which resides in the foundations of the Western metaphysics. He puts difference of the different against dominance of *the identical*. By this, he aims at initiating a philosophical tradition which bases itself on responsibility without using violence against difference of the different. According to Levinas, in a society composed of differences, the most significant problem refers to ruling out the issue of responsibility (Burggraeve 2005, 60-61).

In Heidegger's early work, ontology –the science of Being in the Aristotelian sense- is fundamental, and Dasein is the fundament or condition of possibility for any ontology, a being whose ‘a priori’ structure must first be clarified in an existential analysis. For Levinas, the exceptional character of Heideggerian ontology is that it presupposes the factual situation, or existential facticity, of the human being (Levinas 1996, 1).

According to Levinas, the fundamental character of Heideggerian ontology is that it firstly presumes the factual situation of the human being because the comprehension of being does not approve a solely intellectual attitude. Ontology is not only or just a science but it also forms the anthropological preparation for the particular of the problem of Being. Levinas calls: “*The profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy*”. Because of the comprehension of being, Heidegger reunites the Platonic tradition of Western Philosophy. A relation with an entity cannot be for Levinas, “*unless it is the other (autrui)*” (Levinas 1996, 1).

The identification of the understanding of being with the fullness of concrete existence initially risks drowning ontology in existence. This philosophy of existence, which Heidegger rejects as a designation of his own work, is merely the counterpart- but an inevitable one- of his conception of ontology. Historical existence which interests the philosopher in that it is ontology is of interest to human beings and literature because it is dramatic. When philosophy and life are confused, we can no longer know whether we are interested in philosophy because it is life, or whether we care about life because it is philosophy. The essential contribution of the new ontology may appear in its contrast to classical intellectualism. To understand a tool is not to see it, but to know how to use it; to understand our situation in reality is not to define it, but to be in an affective state. To understand being is to exist (Levinas 1998, 3).

The fact that we are responsible beyond our intentions means that the domination via our consciousness and our mastery of reality through consciousness is not the only way to have relation with the reality. We are already present in the reality with our being. According to Heidegger's philosophy, our consciousness of reality does not match with our existence in the world. However, the philosophy of existence suddenly is wiped out in the face of ontology. Levinas expresses the existence as understanding. Thus, the transcendence of the verb of knowing is connected to the verb of existing. Therefore, "*All men by nature desire to know*" which is the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* stays true for a philosophy (Levinas 1998, 3-6). And in consequence, Levinas indicates that:

Its responsibility for the other, the proximity of the neighbor, does not signify a submission to the non-ego; it means an openness in which being's essence is surpassed in inspiration. It is an openness of which respiration is a modality or a foretaste, or, more exactly, of which it retains the aftertaste. Outside of any mysticism, in this respiration, the possibility of every sacrifice for the other, activity and passivity coincide (Levinas 2006, 115).

Conclusion

Also, Levinas propounds to use in the meaning of foreign, as distinct from *the other one*, instead of *the Other*, which is thought of as a person who is defined opposite himself. In this sense, we can exemplify that Palestinian and Israeli Jewish are accepted one another for *the Other*. Just as, it is same as *the Other* of black and white. This example might be reproduced, and also their differentiated types are too many as far as gender mainstreaming. To illustrate, it is inevitable a real that African-American a woman is *the Other* according to white-American. At all events is a matter of a foreign opposite *the Other*, a superiority struggle, a contempt (Bernasconi 2011).

Nowadays, this originates from making sense of our world by means of recognition and comprehension capacity of West. Cultures which are condemned to *identical* are crushed under pressure of *identical*, and consequently discrepancy of differential is destroyed due to not standing to differential entity also. Also, we cannot overlook the political and judiciary effects of *identical* (Gözel 2011). Discrepancy tries to be fused within other society, and *the Other* always is subject to *identical*, anyway such a society acknowledges *identical* to all individuals and doesn't care of discrepancy because improvement is not possible in a society in which discrepancies are ignored. Our social structure may go on only when we have *identical* idea and notion. However, major problems precisely arise from here. Being fused inside identical of *the Other*, that is Levinas says; *the Other of identical* (Gözel 2005).

On the other hand, Derrida takes a lot from Levinas even if he denies most of it. The emphasis of Levinas on "*non-violence*" is another way of violence which engages in violence on the '*identical*'. Since *Other* conscious, nevertheless, can exist when it separates from *the Other* so that it is strength applied in *the Other*. Denial of that strength must be violent to undercut any claims which are oriented to the ethical stance of Levinas contains kind of *non-violence*. Derrida has held to the idea of *the Other* that is always over there. Moreover, considering Levinas's phenomenology, he has emphasized language instead of conscious descriptions. According to him, language is never entirely inherent. It has always external roots because language can be considered as language only if it is used for the communication with *the Other*, and it contains not only messages sent to *Other* but also *Others* itself. This, for Derrida establishes two ethical ideas. According to the first one, the absolute ethical stance is violence against violence and

therefore cannot be ethic as pure form. There is no pure or absolute ethics. Secondly, it is never possible for ethics to exist, because *the self* is always in contact with *the Other* (Derrida 2005, 110-111).

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