Lévinasian Ethics of Responsibility: Conditions for a Peaceful Co-existence

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Abstract: This paper intends to discover the significance of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas' perspective on human relationships, which he presents as an ethics of responsibility. We will illustrate its usefulness in contributing to an ethical peace over political peace. An ethics of responsibility is considered a pathway to promote human worthiness and create ethical peace. In each society, violence is maintained if there is still one person dominating others because of political, economic, and social status or racial and gender privilege. Lévinas proposes that relations with others should begin from the reverse instead of prioritizing ontology for ethics. For him, ethics is the priority when encountering others. This change in the paradigm of thought comes with a thorough re-examination of interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Ethical Peace • Political Peace • Ethics of Responsibility • Freedom and Hospitability

Introduction

History refers to the events that have shaped every society, every community, and the world we live in; violence is interwoven into it. There seems to be no escape from violence because it is an observable feature of societal life. Does this mean that something good might result from accepting the unavoidable existence of violence in history? Counter-violence is justified, for example, to resist the ongoing unjust invasion of the Russian army into Ukraine. But what about the disaster it provokes? For Lévinas, the suffering and meaninglessness that evil inflicts could never be the last say. Humanity suffers from this evil because of the constant denial of duty and responsibility to care for others. As Lévinas writes, "the humanity of man is fraternal

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solidarity with creation," a "responsibility for everything and for all."[1] In the meaninglessness of suffering, the sufferer evokes a call for help and compassion.

This paper analyses Emmanuel Lévinas' ethics of responsibility and rethinks the possibility of mitigating worldwide political violence. It has three parts: (1) Lévinas' perspective on political and ethical peace, (2) the twofold condition of the ethics of responsibility, and (3) Lévinasian ethical responsibility and its prospective peace.

Lévinas' perspective on political and ethical peace

Usually, states and individuals construe peace through a set of sophisticated contracts and policies that ensure universal human rights and where obligations are respected. Such rights and obligations are legitimate because they are developed based on "a rational ontology that appeals to the universal essence of the human."[2] However, justice and peace proceed from a convention of rights and treaties. In this case, the obligation to observe a peace treaty lies in the interests of the affected parties. Peace treaties serve various interests of the parties involved but are no guarantee for lasting justice and peace. From a Lévinasian perspective, a treaty merely suspends violence for some time. It lasts insofar as both parties adhere to the agreed-upon terms and conditions.

Lévinas warns,

> Here you have the ubiquity and the omnitemporality of the violence which exterminates: there is no radical

[1] Emmanuel Lévinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in *Collected Philosophical Papers,* trans. Alphonse Lingis, 175-186 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 184-185.

[2] Catriona Hanley, "Lévinas on Peace and War," *Athena: Filosofia Studijo* no. 2 (2006): 70-81.

> difference between peace and war, between war and holocaust. Extermination has already begun during peacetime…Everywhere war and murder lie concealed, assassination lurks in every corner, killings go on on the sly.[3]

A peace concord is considered political peace because the rights and obligations imposed are created and guaranteed by politics between states. However, the notion of peace from a political standpoint could be problematic. In Lévinas' assessment, political peace does not recognize alterity and uniqueness. Instead, human beings are treated on similarity-sameness terms. Hence, their rights are encapsulated in the same category or policy for peace. Because policies for peace tend to be imposed across politically and identically treated groups, the chance of discriminating against others' perspectives or marginalizing other voices is great. Instead of safeguarding peace, an across-the-board politics might instigate further violence.

The war between Russia and Ukraine is a vivid example of an unguaranteed peace treaty. When waging war against Ukraine, President Putin justifies the invasion for Russian soldiers and domestic citizens, that is, to prevent genocide by Ukraine and protect innocent civilians. He justified himself in the position of just war tradition. Still, this justification is open to the abuse of that tradition because Ukraine is alleged to have committed genocide against Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Additionally, the Russia-Ukraine war has gone beyond the boundary of just war theory,[4] causing

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[3] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings,* trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 192-193.

[4] Peter Olsthoorn, "Fighting Justly: The Russia-Ukraine War and the Usefulness of Morality," in *Reflections on the Russia-Ukraine War,* edited by Maarten Rothman, Lonneke Pererkamp and Sebastiaan

vast "numbers of unintended civilian casualties" as well as "civilian infrastructure."[5] Indeed, the attack violates the norms of the just war and fails to protect civilians. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war prevails in two separate domains: the political decision to wage an unjust war and the sending of soldiers to fight justly. However, for Walzer the soldiers are unaccountable for what they fight but for how they fight.[6] Although Russian soldiers are morally permissible to kill Ukrainian soldiers who defend their country, it is never just.[7] And,

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Rietjens, 385-396 (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024), 389-391. According to Olsthoorn, the just war theory is abused by Russian President Putin. Regarding *Jus ad bellum* - the right to wage war, there is no justified reason to wage war between Russia and Ukraine. Concerning *Jus in bello* – the laws and ethics that warfare must consider, the Russian invasion caused Ukrainian casualties, even though the Russian side accused the Ukrainian military of shielding them with civilians.

[5] Olsthoorn, "Fighting Justly: The Russia-Ukraine War and the Usefulness of Morality," 390.

[6] Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), xi-xii. Walzer indicates that "no political leader can send soldiers into battle, asking them to risk their lives and to kill other people, without assuring that their cause is just – and that of their enemies unjust."

[7] Olsthoorn, "Fighting Justly: The Russia-Ukraine War and the Usefulness of Morality," 392. Cf. the example of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defense Force, *Afghanistan Inquiry Report*. There are currently limitations on what soldiers can do when they are on duty. If they violate those limitations, such as deliberately killing civilians, they will be investigated and prosecuted, as happened in Iraq and Afghanistan. Learning from the unjust war in Vietnam many years ago, Thomas Nagel states that "if the participation of the United States in the Indo-Chinese war is entirely wrong to begin with, then that engagement is incapable of providing a justification for any measures, taken in its pursuits – not only for the measures which are atrocities in every war, however just its aims." Cf. Nagel, "War and Massacre," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 2 (1972): 123-144. The unjust war in Ukraine is also aggressive in the same manner; are the Russian soldiers aware of this unfair invasion?

of course, it was and still is wrong to inflict heavy casualties on the local population.

This aspect leads us to consider and evaluate the ethical motivation of soldiers and political leaders. Politics and morality hardly settle on each other. They seem to oppose each other because of the agenda that each one endorses. Lévinas is clear about this when he writes, "The art of 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 is to naiveté."[8] In politics, ethics could be marginalized. Political compromises and negotiations are lifelines to settle conflicts and arrive at a politically driven peace accord, but they do not assure genuine peace. While decisions derived from compromises oblige the parties involved to uphold and hold on to those decisions, this seems possible only insofar as each party's interest is upheld. Elsewhere, Hanley criticizes political peace when she writes, "The ontology of human rights does not provide grounds for true peace, because in each case I am excused from responsibility for you at the moment that I abandon my interest in you as a case of you as unique – other."[9] From this perspective, political peace is not only a means to protect one's interest but also creates the possibility to buy some time before the subsequent explosion of violence appears.

The shift in thought and behavior does not have to advocate a religious or ideological persuasion. Lévinas remarks that religion or ideology does not seem to guarantee a person's security from violence. Neither are they an indestructible refuge from violence. In contrast to what political peace advocates or religious and ideological persuasion do, Lévinas suggests the concept

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[8] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 21.

[9] Hanley, "Lévinas on Peace and War," 74.

of 'ethical peace.' Ethical peace is construed when people and groups' unique and different experiences are respected. Ethical peace is a better alternative than political peace because of the primacy of the ethical challenge of alterity. Why is this so? Lévinas answers, "My wound, my suffering is not universal, but intimately particular."[10] By implication, the ethical treatment of peace could more adequately redress my suffering rather than the application of a rational ontology that universalizes my suffering into a single set of policies.

Lévinas sees the relationship between two or more persons as an "asymmetry of intersubjectivity."[11] Such a relationship with others is unique and unassimilable. If this is what an ethical relationship is, as Lévinas suggests, a peaceful co-existence between agents should be grounded in something pre-political. Following Lévinas' thought, one could say that ethics precedes politics. Ethical peace is before any peace agreement (e.g., a contract) because it is "rooted in recognition of the radical difference of the other from me…[However] how we might get from the peace that preceded the political to peace within the political realm"[12] is a critical concern that begs an answer from a Lévinasian standpoint.

An ethical paradigm of peace is essential to the political discourse in shaping a new understanding of the political. It is not a peace "beyond the opposition between peace and war as ordinarily conceived,"[13] which is calculated, meditated, and politically driven. Indeed, a politics of compromise could be disadvantageous to

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[10] Hanley, "Lévinas on Peace and War," 71.

[11] Emmanuel Lévinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, 103-121 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 107.

[12] Hanley, "Lévinas on Peace and War," 71.

[13] Robert Bernasconi, "Different Styles of Eschatology: Derrida's Take on Lévinas' Political Messianism," *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 5.

relationships between groups. Some claims might be left unattended, and views that are different from those of a mainstream group would not be considered seriously. Moreover, a group with more robust social and economic bargaining power than others might confront or manipulate the creation of policies that would serve its interest. Because compromise is a political tool that tends to neglect weaker groups, a favorable and genuinely beneficial solution for all stakeholders is not forthcoming. Instead, it could result in the colonization of alterity and the imposition of a single perspective. Situations such as this could inflict injustice.

While policies and acts of lesser violence are significant steps that aim for justice, Lévinas registers that they fail to account for the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the neighbors because they lump differences together and treat and judge them through a single overarching standard. Treating differences this way could still result in violence. While the political step toward justice is necessary, it is not enough. According to Lévinas, the calling of responsibility emphasizes the "idea of justice" that grasps an ethical "response to the face of the other."[14] This ethical response stands beyond the possibility of knowledge.

When talking about justice, the ethical relationship takes precedence. The necessity of politics on the question of justice can be accepted if the socio-political institutions can be defined as the third party. For Lévinas, politics remains positive when the developments of social and political structures guarantee that the third party is inspired by a heteronomous responsibility of one to the other. The third-party must construct a just 'co-existence,' whereby everyone can

[14] Joseph Cohen, "Introduction: Emmanuel Lévinas - From Philosophy to the Other," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20, no. 3 (2012): 317.

create relationships based on reasonable equality and fairness. It is precisely the beginning of sharing and social justice. However, in reality, no one can deny that the Russian government runs the risk of deteriorating because their tasks of guaranteeing justice for their people fail. Their failure to ensure justice renders a constant threat of structural violence and tyranny.[15] Hence, justice without concern for the unique other can become rotten. This inevitably implies structural violence.[16]

In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas asserts that charity plays a vital role in leading and correcting the direction that justice takes. Thus, the absence of charity amongst institutions and politics of justice would hardly recognize the face of the other.[17] There can never be a discussion of justice without the other. Lévinas alludes to the "commandment of saintliness" when speaking of justice tempered by charity. Such a commandment is pre-original in humanity's existence. Hence, it is not something foreign to humanity who is, first and foremost, directed to this commandment. While Heidegger views the human person as someone who searches for the meaning of being, Lévinas thinks that a human being is called to a life of charity for the other.[18]

In his view, peace and justice are connected to eschatology. The connection is surprising because it

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[15] Roger Burggraeve, "The Other and Me: Interpersonal and Social Responsibility in Emmanuel Lévinas," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62, no. 2 (2006): 642.

[16] Roger Burggraeve, "The Good and Its Shadow: The View of Lévinas on Human Rights as the Surpassing of Political Rationality," *Human Rights Review* 6, no. 2 (2005): 84-86.

[17] Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Lévinas," in *The Provocation of Lévinas: Rethinking the Other,* eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, 180-192 (London: Routledge, 1988), 181.

[18] Wright, "The Paradox of Morality," 180.

seems unrelated to human affairs. Yet, for Lévinas, eschatology is beyond totality, objectivity, and history. Thus, the notion of responsibility to construe peace and justice is sustained by eschatology. An eschatology of justice and peace does not pertain to the last things. It is an eschatology in the here and now that is simultaneously "beyond the totality or beyond history."[19] Lévinas clarifies, over and again, that eschatology "is not the last judgment that is decisive, but the judgment of all the instants in time, when the living is judged."[20]

In *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas' project of justice represents a link between the two aspects: being in the world "where everything possible is permitted"[21] and being otherwise that is the responsibility I am obliged to take without obligation.[22] Doing justice is directed to 'being otherwise' here and now. 'Being otherwise' withdraws from Heidegger's ontological connotation of 'being there' and draws to a core of being as a matter of 'being differently' in the world.[23] 'Being differently' in the world can be understood as an incarnation here and not elsewhere, provoking my responsibility for the other. Such a responsibility opens the self to realizing justice in the here and now.

An ethical vision for peace and justice aligns well with Lévinas' thesis on the ethics of responsibility for the other. Accordingly, ethical thinking is the original

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[19] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22.

[20] Ibid., 23.

[21] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 6.

[22] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 13.

[23] Michael Purcell, "Is Theology Fundamental? The Scope and Limits of Doing Theology with Lévinas," in *Responsibility, God and Society: Theological Ethics in Dialogue – Festschrift Roger Burggraeve,* eds. Johan De Tavernier, Joseph Selling, Johan Verstraeten, Paul Schotsmans, 123-142 (Leuven, Paris, Dudley: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2008), 126.

foundation of interpersonal relationships because one's responsibility for the other precedes any conception of ethnic boundary and egoism.

Two-fold conditions of the ethics of responsibility

In reading Lévinas, one can observe that freedom could be distinguished into "spontaneity"[24] and "ethical responsibility."[25] The former identifies with the ability to objectify the other. At the same time, the latter is the ability to respond to the command or call of the singular other. The objectification of the other becomes manifest in utilitarian and Kantian ethical doctrines. From a utilitarian perspective, the value of something is measured according to its usefulness. In the Kantian context, the sovereignty of the subject lies in the determination of the self and the fulfillment of duty without regard for the circumstances or interests of the other. In both cases, the treatment of the other is grounded in a strategic calculation of "indifferent individualism"[26] and the "determination of the other by the same."[27]

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[24] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83; see also Deborah Achtenberg, *Essential Vulnerabilities: Plato and Lévinas on Relations to the Other* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

[25] Emmanuel Lévinas, "Ethics and Infinity," trans. Richard Cohen, *Cross Currents* 34, no. 2 (1984): 192.

[26] Annabel Herzog, *Lévinas's Politics* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2020), 11.

[27] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83. [In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, "the Same" refers to the self, or one's experience, consciousness, and existence. For Levinas, existence comes from the irreducible relationship between "the Same" and "the Other", or the other person. – Ed.]

Responsibility as the recognition of freedom

Lévinas distances himself from these ethical doctrines. He lays out the foundation of his critique in *Totality and Infinity* to figure out how a non-oppositional relationship with the other becomes possible. It appears that this could occur when the Self ('I') regards the other, in the very first place, as someone who does not pose a threat to me; how I conceive the other influences my behavior, attitude, and perception toward them. This, in turn, becomes visible and ultimately felt by the other. To conceive the self toward responsibility as freedom is the possibility for an infinite ethical commitment to the other. Unlike utilitarians and Kantians, Lévinas claims that responding to the voice of the other has priority over the self. This claim does not mean one must neglect or deny oneself to reach out to the other. Instead, one should respond to outsiders in a non-cognitive and non-calculative manner. A non-cognitive treatment of the other is a counterpoint for both Kantians and utilitarians because the person frees oneself "from the enchantments to the self.[28]

Ethical responsibility as freedom means that I am moved by the other. It is a movement that recognizes the singularity of the other who looks at me and to whom I respond accordingly. When "the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard."[29] The 'I' is deposed of its superimposing agential function and only moved by alterity, the absolute other. Nevertheless, if others command me to act according to their calls, does this not indicate they have power over me? If it is correct that the other controls me because they command me to act in a

[28] Achtenberg, *Essential Vulnerabilities: Plato and Lévinas on Relations to the Other*, 5.

[29] Lévinas, "Ethics and Infinity," 194.

certain way, how can I say that I am free? This view, however, misses the point. According to Lévinas, there is no determination between me and the other within the context of responsibility as freedom. The other, says Lévinas, questions my freedom and spontaneity and challenges me to act responsibly. The other is neither controlled nor determined by me. Instead, I am called to surpass its spontaneity to choose the other and become responsible for freedom. Lévinas calls this approach "an intentionality of a wholly different type"[30] or "intentionality of transcendence"[31] because "it is a 'vision' without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision."[32] However, why should the vulnerability of the other move me, the exteriority, whose voice resists objectification? My responsibility for the other rests on fear: "Fear for the other, fear for the death of the other man is my fear, but it is in no way a fear for oneself," he answers.[33] On the one hand, this means that I have the potential to negate or kill the other because of my spontaneous and arbitrary freedom. That is, I might cause his death. However, knowing fully well of the strong tendency for "violence and murder" that I "can bring about,"[34] I must heed his call, his suffering, on the other.

Departing from a Kantian formulation of universal respect anchored in the universality of a law, Lévinas explains, "To respect is to bow down not before the law, but before a being who commands a work from me."[35] The other is someone, a singular and unique person who suffers, whose command I approach "not by appealing to

[30] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

[31] Ibid., 49.

[32] Ibid., 23.

[33] Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 46.

[34] Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 144.

[35] Ibid., 35.

the abstraction of some anonymous law, some juridical entity."[36] I do not think Lévinas intends to downplay the importance of the universal law. For example, as far as global solidarity is concerned, universal law is essential in setting the stage for various states to work together to help victims of war regarding immigration, food supplies, etc. However, it seems that Lévinas has second thoughts about a universal moral law insofar as it tends to be legalistic, political, and calculative. For him, one could not strive for infinite responsibility if one's movement results from calculation. Ethics lies in the concrete suffering and vulnerability I see and hear from this person who looks at me and calls me. Thus, I respond to this unique, concrete person, not an abstract juridical entity. Therefore, it goes to say that responsibility is stimulated by the other. Similarly, because I respond to others' questions about my spontaneity, I become ethically responsible for the otherness of the other.

Freedom moves from knowledge (interiority or consciousness) to social relations (exteriority). Mature freedom, one attuned to an ethical commitment to the other, as opposed to arbitrary and spontaneous freedom, is the gateway to social interactions. Consistent with Lévinas' opposition to a conception of freedom based on the determination of the other by the self, the goal of social relations is the recognition of the singularity of the other who is irreducible after our effort to conceptualize their presence.[37] The face-to-face encounter neither occurs in "cognitive reason" nor "aesthetic experience."[38] In both instances, the other is reduced to an object that satisfies my need. In this case, social relations are not intended to fill in a selfish end. Thus, the self is required to understand social relations adequately.

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[36] Lévinas, *Entre Nous*,144.
[37] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 18.
[38] Herzog, *Lévinas's Politics*, 1.

The first understanding of social relations does not imply the sensibility of something. Put another way, it is not the experience of the "aesthetic" food. As I enjoy my food, "I make them my own. I transmute the other into the same."[39] The food I eat becomes my nourishment, but the other is not someone to be transmuted by the self into itself. Nevertheless, what happens when the other is objectified for one's enjoyment is that the former becomes "my own energy, my strength, me."[40] Accordingly, the imperialism of the aesthetic is the antithesis of social relations. It is a very destructive relationship because the "imperialism of the same is the whole essence of [my arbitrary] freedom"[41] that possesses, "suspends, postpones the unforeseeable future of the element – its independence, its being."[42] The objectification of the other takes place from enjoyment to objectification. Enjoyment is "anterior to the crystallization of consciousness, I and non-I, into subject and object."[43] Lévinas describes this movement in that the "objectification operates in the gaze in a privileged way."[44] It means that objectification grasps; the laboring hand "takes and comprehends"[45] the other to the same and "in its possessive grasp suspends the independence"[46] of the other.

The second reference to social relations from Lévinas' perspective is not only about the consciousness of beings but also about the comprehension and objectification of something. By comprehending the other into an object, one risks negating the other, constraining the possibility of a face-to-face encounter. As Lévinas says, "If freedom

[39] Achtenberg, *Essential Vulnerabilities*, 62.
[40] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 111.
[41] Ibid., 87.
[42] Ibid., 158.
[43] Ibid., 188.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 161.
[46] Ibid., 158.

denotes the mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other, knowledge, where an existent is given by interposition of impersonal Being, contains the ultimate sense of freedom."[47] The ultimate freedom comes when I comprehend things that I come across with "master, dominate and dispose of"[48] them. I control, and thus, I am sovereign over and above what I comprehend. My spontaneous and arbitrary freedom increases because I master them.

Human beings can state the truth that we are equal. All of us "irreducible others who are utilizing [their] *our* face makes present 'the infinity of the other.'"[49] Sociality enables the self to recognize the other as escaping categorization and conceptualization. As Lévinas clarifies, reason tends to know only itself. The "manifestation of freedom, neutralizing the other and encompassing" them,[50] is unsurprising if its analysis is primarily from the sovereign of reason. While reason tends to put the other into a concept according to its terms and to reduce it to the same, reason fails because knowledge or theory is designated in a relation. Lévinas states, "The knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without making it in any way whatever by this relation."[51] The knowing needs the known to manifest itself. Similarly, the 'I' needs the other and vice versa to manifest its real being in the ethical relation.

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[47] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.

[48] Ibid., 161.

[49] Roger Burggraeve, "Fraternity, Equality, Freedom: On the Soul and the Extent of Our Responsibility," in *Responsibility, God and Society: Theological Ethics in Dialogue – Festschrift Roger Burggraeve,* eds. Johan De Tavernier, Joseph Selling, Johan Verstraeten, Paul Schotsmans, 1-24 (Leuven, Paris, Dudley: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2008), 14.

[50] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

[51] Ibid., 42.

Moreover, responsibility as freedom in this sense relates to recognizing the infinite alterity of the other. Insofar as reason tries to objectify the other into concepts or themes, it is unsuccessful. Lévinas identifies the movement toward the other as *respect*. The recognition of difference is "respect for exteriority" or "metaphysical desire."[52] Such a relation of respect does not take the other to fill in and satisfy my needs. Instead, it is beyond me and my needs. As Lévinas explains: "The metaphysical desire tends towards something else entirely, toward the absolutely other."[53] The relationship of respect aspires to the infinite singularity of the other, which is "irreducible to the concept [it] constitutes in communicating [its] world."[54] As a person like me, the other resists condemnation into an object of my reason. Sociality, then, as respect "does not cut the bonds a relation implies, yet … these bonds do not unite the same and the other into a whole."[55] The other maintains its independence, its singularity. The bond between the other and I is an authentic experience of freedom because I respond for the other whose calling succeeds in questioning "the exercise of the same."[56]

However, one might ask how encountering another person's unique presence creates social relationships through language. The answer might be found in his words, "…to reach the other is realized in the relationship with the Other that is cast in the relation of language, where the essential is the interpellation, the vocative. The other is maintained and confirmed in his heterogeneity as soon as one calls upon him…; at the same time as grasped, wounded, outraged, he is

[52] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.
[53] Ibid., 33.
[54] Ibid., 252.
[55] Ibid., 48.
[56] Ibid., 43.

'respected'." [57] When I relate and speak to the other, s/he is 'respected'. S/he is not a category I can comprehend, but s/he is the one I speak to.[58] However, what if I am to respond to the singularity of the other? Does this mean that the other determines me? Lévinas answers that it is in the respectful encounter of the other that my freedom develops. Freedom matures through sociality – in a relationship of respect for someone other than me. The foundation of the self is not in its dependence on itself but in its encounter with exteriority. Exteriority, however, also respects my singular independence. Lévinas thus asserts that the "foundation of the self" is not found "in itself" but "outside of heteronomous opinions."[59]

The concept of fraternity understands the self-identified from a heteronomous relationship. Following the Lévinasian ethics of responsibility-by-and-for-the-other as proximity, fraternity takes place when the 'I' is touched by the appeal of the other in their own account. The other touches me when one comes close to me yet remains infinitely separated. Fraternity is the proximity with the other without absorption or fusion because the appeal to the highest "non-indifference" is expressed in "the irreducible alterity of the other."[60] By this ethical proximity, one can be present to one another nonviolently. We are close to each other even before I attune myself actively to the other knowingly and willingly. The 'I' is bound to the "ethical dynamism of being connected to the other and connecting oneself to the other."[61] In this ethical dynamism, each person remains a uniquely irreducible alterity.

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[57] Ibid., 69.
[58] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69.
[59] Ibid., 88.
[60] Burggraeve, "Fraternity, Equality, Freedom," 3.
[61] Ibid., 15.

Also, my relationship with the world is a sojourn – a continuous discovery of the self with the other. The world thus teaches me because it opens me to the other. With the world, I am no longer preoccupied with myself. Instead, I journey with the other toward the maturation of freedom and establishment of sociality. In this case, human freedom is a pre-original covenant that fulfills two aspects. First, freedom concerns a responsibility that does not rest on free choice. Instead, it concerns a freedom that, "thanks to the radical passivity of the 'being linked with the other despite oneself,' is relieved of its own weight and seriousness."[62] It entails that if I remain in myself as a free and conscious being, I will threaten my being by my freedom. On the contrary, if I am linked with the other despite myself, my own weight of existence is liberated and healed. Second, the freedom of being does not concern the free will that "can choose between two equally neutral possibilities."[63] Yet, the freedom of response is animated, literally inspired, and oriented because it is raised above itself toward the other than itself. Thus, freedom is a response that one can choose to respond to the appeal of the other.

The maturation of freedom takes place in other-oriented directions. Mature freedom is the effort to go beyond oneself for the other. It is just like breaking the wall that separates one from another. The wall is the indifferent self that is only absorbed by its own interest. I can recognize what the others could teach me by breaking the wall. Teaching stimulates the passage from self-interestedness, control, and domination to other-interestedness and generosity. To receive the teaching of the other, the self must abandon its sovereign subjectivity. Doing so, the self would be "enveloped by

[62] Burggraeve, "Fraternity, Equality, Freedom," 8.
[63] Ibid., 9.

concern for the human fate."[64] If this is correct, the interaction and cooperation of people in various areas of social life are likely to succeed. Moreover, the other-oriented view differentiates Lévinas from Kantian and utilitarian ethics. The former emphasizes the sovereignty of the individual. The latter underlines the usefulness of something for the greater good as the measure of its value. The differences in ethical doctrines allow us to appreciate the Lévinasian view on responsibility, particularly the disposition to welcome strangers. This brings us to the second understanding of the ethics of responsibility.

Responsibility as Hospitality

There are different ways to understand the notion of hospitality. From its etymological conception, hospitality comes from *hospitium* [Latin] and *hospes*, which means both 'guest', and 'host'.[65] But *hospes* is drawn from the word *hostis*, which initially meant "to have power" for another. This power is described as "cordiality, friendliness, warmth, geniality." The Latin word *hospes* produced such terms as 'hospital' or 'inn'.[66] A hospital or an inn is primarily intended to assist people in recuperating from illness and rehabilitating a weak condition. This reminds people to be hospitable to guests. This probably gave birth to the idea of the right of a guest/stranger to a hospitable environment.

Hospitality thus has a double meaning. On the one side, it could mean a visitor, i.e., a stranger. On the other

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[64] Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 112.

[65] John Koenig, "Hospitality," *Encyclopedia of Religion,* https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/christianity-general/hospitality [accessed December 6, 2024].

[66] Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 149.

side, it refers to the host – someone who entertains, welcomes, and accommodates the stranger. In a host-visitor relationship, both parties are responsible. Insofar as the visitor is within the domain of the host, the latter is responsible for the welfare and security of the former. Similarly, the stranger conducts him/herself in a certain way, according to acceptable norms agreed upon. The individual is bound by the regulations accompanying their visit to a particular place. The relationship between a host and a stranger is motivated by reciprocal attention to each other. For example, in the business industry, reciprocity is determined by the agreement entered into by two contracting parties. However, reciprocity determines how much the host accommodates a visitor's/ guest's needs. The business relationship is calculative: the host renders services, and the stranger pays for them. The host satisfies the stranger's needs but is tagged with a price. Lévinas' ethics of responsibility goes a step further: from reciprocity to infinite responsibility for the other. Hospitality is beyond reciprocity. Instead, it delivers "more passively than any passivity from links in a causal chain."[67] I oblige to the other's summon even before I concede to any agreement, "before being present to myself or returning to self."[68] Lévinas indicates hospitality as "the-one-for-the-other in the ego."[69]

Similarly, I advocate an ethics of hospitality according to which a sense of generous disposition of *receptivity* and *sensitivity* to the stranger's needs is at play. That is different from a relationship based on economic reciprocity. In my view, a host treats and receives strangers with respect. Ties of a friendly encounter bind the host. Of course, they can also be held responsible for the behaviors and actions of strangers

[67] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being,* 79.
[68] Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 149.
[69] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being,* 79.

whom they receive. Normally, amiable conduct is expected from the receiver and the stranger. Following Lévinas, I also think that the ethics of responsibility is non-calculative. Hence, expecting something from a stranger for the hospitable accommodation they received should be out of the picture.

Unlike a reciprocal relation that tends to get something in return for the services done, ethical responsibility is a commitment that involves no compensation. Nevertheless, why is infinite/absolute responsibility for the other so important? Why does one have to aspire beyond reciprocal relations? Is reciprocity not the order of the game to achieve economic wealth that could alleviate people's lives? Is it different from how society prospers and elevates living conditions? Reciprocity could safeguard people's equal interaction and footing. For Lévinas, a reciprocal relationship is inadequate to guarantee the place of ethics in socio-political relations because the relationship could become mechanical. Instead of giving freely – before any agreement – people interact with each other based on reciprocity. They tend to expect to get something in return for what they do. However, an infinite relationship of responsibility stresses a radically ethical commitment to the other before oneself.

The hospitable condition is revealed in the epiphany of the face. The epiphanic event displays a deep awareness of the other. For Lévinas, the other is the neighbour, "who is not necessarily kin, but who can be kin."[70] Thus, an ethical other is not necessarily a diverse or different group identified by nationality or ethnicity.

[70] Benda Hofmeyr, "Lévinas and the Possibility of Dialogue with 'Strangers'," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 47, no. 2 (2016): 176.

In fact, "the other is phenomenological, not categorical."[71] The face of the other is radical alterity that is both hard and vulnerable simultaneously. On the one hand, the alterity of the other is hard insofar as it presents itself to the other whose performance to the self is irreducible. It is hard because the self is in its attempt at being (*conatus essendi*) to substantiate in a continuous 'struggle for life - by trial and error'. The appearance of the other in front of my existence "without my calling upon or having designed or conceived of the other beforehand"[72] becomes a threat to me. However, the other is radically '*heteronomous*' or '*an absolute other*' to me. As a result, the self is never the law for others. Instead, the other imposes him/herself inescapably upon me as something that literally 'overcomes' me from elsewhere.[73] The heteronomy of the face is a strange and ethical event that flows directly from the alterity of the face.

On the other hand, the radical alterity of the other in their foreignness is also vulnerable. The other is a foreigner to myself who appears homeless because they do not belong to my organized world, so the other escapes from my providence or falls outside of it. This vulnerable

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[71] Lévinas, "Ethics and Politics," in *The Lévinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989): 289-297.

[72] Roger Burggraeve, "Affected by the face of the other. The Lévinasian movement from the exteriority to the interiority of the infinite," *Dialegesthai Rivista telematica di filosofia,* 10 (2009): 5.

[73] Burggraeve, "Affected by the face of the other," 5. To say that I do not impose myself on the other is good for the other because I do not alter or transmute the other to myself. But what about the other way around? If I allow the other to impose her/himself upon me, would she/he not alter me? If I allow him/her to impose her/himself upon me, will he/she not act inhospitably upon me? Although the infinity of the other is the event of the subject's de-centered call, the inter-subjectivity is in a "phenomenological description of multiple moments in which alterity meets the self and saturates one's intuitive gaze." Cf. Nigel Zimmermann, *Lévinas and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 27.

appearance tempts or invites me to '*murder*' since the 'I,' in the first place, strives for the capacity to unfold the other. The vulnerability of the face challenges my longing for happiness since the 'I' tries to draw the other toward me and inflict upon them a violent act. This action, in other words, attempts to subjugate, subordinate, and reduce others into my system. That instrumentalizing reduction of the other is historically experienced in the imposition of brutal tyranny, terror, like Nazism. Such violence is also evident in the racially motivated treatment of one group to another in our contemporary times. Lévinas asserts that they are all forms of denying freedom to the other. In that sense, the other becomes vulnerable under the passion of denial, wanting to destroy the other. They become a scapegoat whom the 'I' blames for all of their problems and anxieties.[74] Based on that perception, the 'I' supposes that they can spontaneously discover the other through the appearance of the face – precisely through its countenance, character or personality, family, ethnic or cultural background.

The vulnerability of the other, for Lévinas, is precisely an ethical event that is an encounter with the other. Then, this ethical experience consists of an attempt of the 'I' that endeavours for either happiness or a dominating ability that can reduce, use, and consume the other as an instrument for one's unfolding of existence. This results in a miserable appearance of the other. Burggraeve comments, "This is precisely the core of the ethical experience – at the very moment that the face tempts me in its poverty to grasp, manipulate or abuse it, I experience and feel that which may be possible is not allowed."[75] Indeed, the epiphany of the face displays a paradoxical invitation. On one side, it is the attempt to murder, and the defencelessness of the naked

[74] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 199, 239.
[75] Burggraeve, "Affected by the face of the other," 14.

face is another. This naked face presents itself to me as an appeal "not to kill", which is a rejection of the act of violence. The appeal of the other is characterized by an unconditional obligation that stands open for the other and surpasses one's selfishness.

Responsibility as hospitality is an ethical commitment to the call of the other who is forgotten and neglected in an indifferent sense. The rejection and neglect of the other constitute grave violence against human dignity. It is fundamentally a society's betrayal of its responsibility. Lévinas' view on hospitality intends to inject ethics into politics – the calculative treatment of the other. Politics supplemented by ethics draws institutions from calculative relations to social relations with the other regardless of social, economic, political, linguistic, and cultural affiliation. Responsibility as hospitality thus serves as a reminder to religious or secular institutions to realize ethics in the political domain, uncompromising the other to safeguard selected selves. Bringing ethics to politics is the rediscovery of the infinite commitment to welcome the stranger whose voice always summons the Self to heed. Unlike ethical responsibility as freedom and hospitality, a political relation "interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other person, interrupts the proximity or approach of the neighbor."[76] In other words, politics lacks real freedom and hospitality – an all-embracing welcome of the other and respect for the other's freedom. If this critique is correct, seeing anonymity and the absence of solidarity pervading the social domain is unsurprising. It seems, though, that Lévinas' suggestion is also pie-in-the-sky and very demanding. His project – infinite ethical commitment – seems unrealizable.

[76] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150.

There still seems to be a long way to eradicate poverty, economic divide, inequality, gender discrimination, and unjust war, among others. But the advances made are seeds of hope for a better society. Seemingly, Lévinas' gigantic project is a real challenge to societies that are veering away from the politics of the same to the respect of alterity. Here, it probably challenges political leaders to infuse ethics into politics. Ethics could not allow the other to feel just a bit of mercy, compassion, and acceptance – the ingredients to establishing a peaceful environment. However, as I claimed in the beginning, Lévinasian ethics of responsibility emerges as a desirable prospect for every human being.

Lévinasian ethics of responsibility and its prospective peace

The two-fold conditions explained by Lévinasian ethics of responsibility are complementary to discovering a possibility for the peaceful co-existence of all human beings. The human development process reveals a three-stage scale. The first stage (1) is *il y a* - 'there is'. In this stage, one discovers an unclear distinction between the *self* and external factors. The *self* poses itself as a totality that cannot distinguish between what the *self* is and what is not. In this totality, being is considered as "universal and all-encompassing." The *self* is "an event of being which permeates and bears all beings." As such, it "comprises their unity."[77] Furthermore, the concept of '*il y a'* presents the *self* as an utterly indeterminable being-by-itself. It means that the *self* feels threatened by actions that depersonalize. In a philosophical language,

[77] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being,* 5.

it is called a "being-without-being."[78] Thus, the self only becomes itself by arming itself with all its powers against that threat. It tries to establish itself under being such that it becomes 'mine', self-positioning, or self-establishing.[79] In doing so, the self refers to itself as a principle and origin of its own being.

The construction of the self leads to the second stage, called the *atheist stage* (2). Lévinas explains that this stage promotes freedom by reducing the other to the same. It is recognized through enjoyment. The self poses and enjoys itself as the lord and master of the world because the world is there for me. Hence, reducing the other as much as possible to the self is only feasible.[80] The subject thus tends to objectify others to their interests.

The third stage is a radical stage, which Lévinas identifies as the *metaphysical stage* (3) or social relation. To grow in this stage, one must stop seeing others as objects. It means that one engages with others without encapsulating the other into one's own horizon, without reducing others to the same. Instead, this stage is a transcendent relation that welcomes the other as the other.[81] Regarding human development, every person must reach the third stage, where the path to peace would be established.

On the political level, could political leaders, especially Russian politicians, reach the metaphysical stage? Since they cease at the atheist stage, they hold and alter others into themselves and treat them inferiorly. It results in exercising their political power to dominate others. Besides, how can Ukrainians be hospitable to

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[78] Roger Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other: A Multidimensional Ethics of Responsibility in Lévinas* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2009), 10.

[79] Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other*, 11.

[80] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 111.

[81] Ibid.*,* 134.

Russians who cause pain and bitterness in their lives? There is never a simple answer to those questions. We can only hope that the Russians stop their unjust fighting. It is not a battle for justice but for testing weapons, such as drones, electronic attack systems, cyber weapons, and air-defense capacities, among others.[82] It is undeniable that the destructive power of modern weapons is unimaginable. Nevertheless, these kinds of battlefields become the weakness of the Lévinasian approach since the face of the suffering people is no longer observed directly; their expressions of vulnerability may be unacknowledgeable for the political leaders because they are in their safe and hidden bases while sending orders to military personnel.

Pope Francis, in his letter to the Apostolic Nuncio to Russia after the one-thousand-day mark of the Russia-Ukraine war, expresses his laments for the prolonged war in Ukraine that has inflicted severe wounds on innocent beings bound to that battlefield. The pope writes, "I trust that the humanitarian efforts directed toward the most vulnerable may pave the way for renewed diplomatic efforts, necessary to halt the progression of the conflicts and to achieve the long-awaited peace."[83] He reminds us that "the painful and prolonged duration of this war urgently challenges us, calling us to the duty of reflecting together on how to alleviate the sufferings of those affected and to rebuild

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[82] Martijn van der Vorm and Gijs Tuinman, "Lesson from Ukraine: Benchmark or Significant Exception?" in *Reflections on the Russia-Ukraine War,* eds. Maarten Rothman, Lonneke Peperkamp, Sebastiaan Rietjens, 476-513 (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024), 482-483.

[83] Pope Francis, "Lettera Del Santo Padre Francesco Per L'anniversario Dei 1000 Giorni Della Guerra in Ucraina," November 19, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/letters/2024/documents/20241119-lettera-nunzio-ucraina.html, [accessed December 17, 2024].

peace."[84] The vulnerable faces of others are manifest in the cry for their loved ones who died in war or the cry for their uncertain life caused by war conditions. Their cry must invoke peace rather than war, appeal to dialogue rather than the roar of weapons, reminding of fraternal solidarity over self-interest. The vulnerability of others revealed in their cry drives everyone to take responsibility freely and hospitably to rebuild peace as much as possible according to our capacities.

We are created in the original goodness of creation, which is retained in our essences but is changing our human weaknesses regarding human freedom without responsibility. Thus, the ethical responsibility is a step toward the original goodness of God, the Absolute Other. According to Lévinas, God becomes the third party. God comes to us through the face of the other.[85] Indeed, the question of God in the other is not merely comprehended by human knowledge. Still, the idea of God who lets the divine trace on the alterity of the face makes a connection to the ethical qualification by which the responsibility for the other begins. As Christians, more than fighting, we are invited not only to raise our voices for peace and justice but also to implore the gift of peace in our prayers and our commitment to contribute to the goodness of humanity.

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[84] Salvatore Cernuzio, "Pope to Nuncio to Russia: War is a serious wound inflicted on human family," December 14, 2024, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-12/pope-francis-letter-apostolic-nuncio-russia-war.html, [accessed December 17, 2024].

[85] Lévinas states, "The other is closer to God than I." Cf. Lévinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by A. Lingis (Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: Kluwer/Nijhoff, 1987), 56.

Conclusion

The explication of Lévinas' ethics of responsibility highlights the noble aim for ethical peace, starting with one's free and hospitable responsibility for others' well-being. When we talk about violence, we cannot but lament the rejection of the other because of the superior position of one person or one party over the other. However, it could also become the site of hope for justice and peace to prosper. Violence happens because of indifference, and Lévinas suggests that the infusion of ethics into politics could significantly transform politically calculated relations into ethically sound relations. The ethical relation is realized when societies give primacy to the ethical responsibility, which is not merely a one-moment of being touched by the other. Instead, it is an endless responsibility in which one desires prolonged goodness toward others. What constitutes an ethics of responsibility then lies in one's willingness to transcend oneself for the other.

The perspective of building peace should be considered by more than just politicians. Instead, inspired by Lévinasian ethics of responsibility, each person should acknowledge peace while trying not to deny, dominate, or transmute the other's uniqueness. Recent Catholic teachings invite the faithful to be attentive to the vulnerability of others in all aspects of life. The vulnerable faces of others, such as the migrants, the poor, the orphans, the elderly, the unlearned people, the marginalized, and even the natural ecology, invite us to take responsibility and protect them. As Lévinas indicates, the self cannot deny a radical call from the naked eye of the other. In doing so, the responsibility by and for the other also allows the able-response persons to contribute to goodness. This is a pivotal feature of any pastoral work.

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