

Levinas

by Bart Nooteboom

61. Levinas: philosophy of the other

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From the traditional centrality of the self in Western philosophy it is difficult to find a foundation for benevolence or altruism. Emmanuel Levinas turns it around: the ethical call for benevolence is primary, precedes the self and all consideration of self-interest, and protection of one's interests is a compromise on that. One can and in conditions of real life in society inevitably does compromise on the ethical call, but the call remains valid to maintain an ideal of conduct that we should not forget.

For Levinas the feeling of responsibility for the other is not a rational choice but something that happens to you and that you experience as being chosen or 'elected' and that makes you unique, irreplaceable for the unique other. The ethical call is to surrender to the other, and to suffer from his suffering, an imperative that precedes all other consideration. Levinas speaks of giving oneself as a 'hostage'. With this he means that the self becomes 'victim without being guilty'. Responsibility and dedication to the other go so far that they apply also when the other obstructs or even persecutes one.

In the earlier work of Levinas (*Totality and the infinite*, 1987), to which I limit myself here, the self is, in first instance, tied to itself, which is in due course experienced as frightening, oppressive, or generates boredom, and evokes an urge to escape. 'Evasion' he calls that in one of his earliest works (1982). In his novel *More die of heartbreak* Saul Bellow speaks of the 'claustrophobia of consciousness'. The self needs the other to escape from himself not only for cognitive reasons, as I have emphasized earlier in this blog, but also for emotional, spiritual reasons. The opening to the other is, in other words, not only a search but also a flight.

Levinas concludes that the flight from the self requires that we must not judge or approach the other from the perspective of our existing views. If we do that we never get away and beyond our present self. As long as one takes oneself as point of departure in the approach to the other we remain locked up in ourselves. We must be open to the other without evaluating or judging in advance and without the pretension to ever completely grasp the other.

Levinas says that this opening is not 'receptivity', in which one remains as one is while receiving the other. We require what Levinas calls 'passiveness': one should not determine the terms but surrender to the terms of the other. Levinas uses a metaphor of breathing, and letting oneself be literally inspired (breathed into) by the other. Breathing also is not based on a choice on the basis of an evaluation of what it will yield. It is something you undergo. That is the spirit in which one should set oneself aside.

62. Levinas: justice?

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Levinas posited his extreme surrender to the other as a counterweight to the absolute evil of Nazism and of other ideologies that subjugated the individual human being, and to be strong enough it must be absolute.

However, Levinas repeatedly recognizes that in the transition from the ideal, isolated relationship between self and other to a society of third and more parties charity towards the single other must make a transition to justice in society, with rules that are universal and impersonal. There I must also feel responsible for third parties and ask myself whether the single other does not damage the other others. There the asymmetry of the ideal relation disappears and reciprocity and equality under the law appear. How that compromise of the ideal relationship for the sake of justice can still reflect the ideal is problematic. How can we maintain the ethical force that Levinas considered necessary as a counterweight to absolute evil in the world? Levinas struggles with this tension and never completely resolves it.

The idea of justice and its content are not elaborated. However that is developed, of crucial importance remains the claim that the rights of people are in the first place rights not of the self but of the other. Justice and the law are not a social contract necessitated by the threat of war of all against all (as Hobbes proposed), but emerge from a feeling of responsibility for the other. Equality under the law is needed for justice but we must not forget that it does not do justice to the uniqueness of individuals. Note that this is in line with my critique of universalism, in item 17 of this blog. Where the other is concerned we remain anarchists at heart. The law must not forget its inspiration and ideal from the responsibility of individual to individual. In that sense justice has a 'bad consciousness' of never quite achieving its ideal and it must remain aware of its shortcomings, and stay open for improvement. The Levinassian relation to the other must be maintained as a source of inspiration and a standard, for personal relations and for social justice.

How can we ensure that law and justice, with all the institutions and power holders associated with them, remain inspired by the responsibility of the self for every suffering of the unique other? According to Lévinas it is a task for 'prophetic voices' to remind the powerful. I quote from *Among us, essays on the thinking of the other* (1991): 'One sometimes hears them in the cries that rise from the folds of politics that, independently from official institutions defend "human rights", sometimes in the songs of poets; sometimes simply in the press and in the public spaces of liberal states ...'. And where justice can never be complete, the 'small good' that people can individually and personally muster for each other creeps into the holes that justice cannot fill. The disappearance of the asymmetry of responsibility in the law need not keep people from bringing that asymmetry of responsibility back into their conduct and their charity.

63. Nietzsche and Levinas

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At first sight few views are so much opposed as those of Nietzsche in his rejection and Levinas in his radical acceptance of responsibility of the self for the other. At second sight there are also commonalities.

First, both use the perspective of embodied cognition, as I do in this blog. Impulses, perceptions and feelings precede cognition and ethics and form the basis for them. Second, both turn away from God. Third, both accept that God was invented as consolation for human vulnerability, and now we must find another way to deal with inevitable suffering. Fourth, for both the making of sacrifices for others is not a moral duty or limitation of freedom, but arises autonomously from inside, either as an overflow from the fullness of life (Nietzsche), or as a deep-seated feeling of responsibility that precedes the self (Levinas). Fifth, both try to say the unsayable, beyond established categories of thought and language. Sixth, both are suspicious of universals that cause neglect of diverse, individual, unique human beings. Seventh, both try to escape from the limitations of the self (transcendence). Eighth, for both identification between people, in reciprocation that results in a merging and equalization, is both impossible and undesirable. Ninth, both turn away from the *conatus essendi*, the drive to survive and manifest oneself, though in very different ways. Tenth, both (but Levinas more in his earlier than in his later work) take the sensual, feeling, exuberant self as a starting point.

But then begins the big difference. Nietzsche begins with the exuberant self, the child, and thinks he can find transcendence from within the autonomous self, from an internally generated fullness, without regard for claims from others or demands for self-constraint, a self that dissociates itself from the other, and in his philosophy he ends up again with the child. Starting with the self, Levinas veers away to the other and its ethical call on the self. For Nietzsche that is treason to the life forces of the self, in a hypocritical and crippling Christian morality of compassion. For Levinas, however, the ethical call to the other is not an appeal to asceticism, not a denial but an affirmation of the self, in being elected.

According to Nietzsche the self experiences a primitive excitement at the suffering of another, and no one benefits from pity, which only multiplies suffering. For Levinas the suffering of the other is unbearable and brought under the responsibility of the self. For Nietzsche suffering is a condition for transformation of the self by the self. For Levinas suffering is a condition for ethics and an escape from the self by the suffering of the other. For Nietzsche separation between self and other yields protection of the self in his emergence from himself, for Levinas it opens the self to the other. Thus, at third sight, in spite of the commonalities between Nietzsche and Levinas the difference is as big as it appeared at first sight.

223. Levinas and Lacan

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I contrasted Levinas, with his philosophy of the other, and Nietzsche, with his 'will to power', in item 63 of this blog, and in a book¹. Like many others, I judged that Levinas went too far in his unconditional surrender to the other, being his/her 'hostage'. Where

does that leave the subject, as an agent, as responsible for its own flourishing? On the other hand, Nietzsche went overboard in his superagency, will to power, will to overcome resistance, in the urge of a flourishing life.

I countered Nietzsche with the argument that in order to flourish the self needs opposition from the other, in order to learn, to be rid of its prejudices and myopia, to achieve the highest form of freedom, including freedom from the prison of the self. And then, I countered Levinas with the argument that if I merit opposition from the other for my flourishing, then the other similarly deserves opposition from me.

Here, enlightened by a book by Mari Ruttiⁱⁱ, I consider the contrast between Levinas and Lacan (with Žižek as a follower). Both Levinas and Lacan engage in ‘philosophy of the other’, recognizing that the self is socially constituted, but morally Lacan goes in the opposite direction. Instead of surrendering to the other he wants to fight free from its imposition, and to grasp freedom outside the strictures imposed by the public symbolic order.

In the opposition between Levinas and Lacan I find myself in a position similar to that between Levinas and Nietzsche. On the one hand I find myself ethically attracted to Levinas’ commitment to the other in his/her vulnerability and suffering. On the other hand I sympathise with Nietzsche and Lacan, in their defence of agency and the flourishing of life against the terrorizing or suffocating imposition of conformance and sacrifice to the other. Again I argue that one needs to ‘let the other in’, and to some extent indeed yield to the other (in ‘passivity’, as Levinas put it), but not only for ethical reasons but also for cognitive and spiritual reasons, as a source of a flourishing life, and then also offer the other to let me in to contribute to his/her flourishing (and hence also be ‘active’).

There is nothing unusual about this. This is normal interaction: the alternation of reception and offer, active and passive.

Here as elsewhere, like an Aristotelian I try to find a good ‘middle’ between extremes, in the same way that one needs to find a good middle between recklessness and courage, altruism and self-interest, trust and control, openness and secretiveness, aggressiveness and defensiveness, and so on. Where the proper middle is depends on circumstances. In some conditions an extreme may be called for.

This is connected with my stance concerning universals, discussed in the preceding item in this blog. They are seldom strict, and how they apply varies. Finding the proper degree, balance, depending on conditions, is a task for ‘practical wisdom’. We may be inspired by virtuosos in it, as role models. Albert Schweitzer, Gandhi, Mandela, perhaps.

Is this too loose, allowing for too many escapes or loopholes? Are there no universals that apply across all contexts, unconditionally? In the preceding item I pleaded for moral universals with the widest possible scope, short of unconditional strictness. To see the limits of some principle is not to deny its force.

At this point I mobilize the distinction I made, in the preceding item, between normative and intentional universals. One needs to draw normative boundaries beyond which one is not prepared to go, as long as there are no convincing countervailing arguments or warrants. But under the wider umbrella of intentional universality one can go beyond that, to understand motives, perhaps sympathize with them, even while acting against them. In a later item I will argue how such understanding of transgression may next yield a starting point for debating and considering a shift of moral universals.

If this is on the level of individuals among each other, how about the relation between individual and collective, between ethics and the public system of justice? That is the subject for the following item.

225. Rebellious capitalism

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In opposition to Levinas, who demanded surrender and awe with respect to the other person, Lacan, and followers Zizek and Badiou, focus on how others can hurt, constrain and gag the self.ⁱⁱⁱ They seek to break out from the repressive dictates of convention, claiming space for rebelliousness and authenticity, and acts of defiance. Such striving for escape from the institutionalized order is also to be found in Foucault and in Derrida's 'deconstruction' of such order.

Zizek claims that the 'postmodern valorization of diversity, glorification of contingency, flexibility, hybridity, and flux mirrors the logic of capitalism, which thrives on the proliferation and dispersion of identities ... (so that) postmodern politics replicates capitalism's dislike of boundaries'.^{iv}

Ruti quite rightly notes that 'neo-liberalism ... permits the heterodoxy, rebelliousness'^v that Zizek seeks. Indeed, as recognized by the economist Joseph Schumpeter, entrepreneurship wreaks 'creative destruction' of the existing order. The economist Friedrich von Hayek, considered to be a godfather of neo-liberalism, called competition a 'discovery process', and claimed that the prime virtue of markets is that they give scope and opportunity for idiosyncratic 'local knowledge' in ways that central planning never could. Instead of being thankful to capitalism for offering this opportunity for rebelliousness, deviance, which they seek, Zizek and Badiou castigate capitalism for it. Capitalism has to be the evil force, no matter what. But it is communism that takes out the scope for rebellion.

Yet I also am deeply critical of the way capitalism has developed. I recently published a highly critical book on markets.^{vi} They are having perverse effects. I go so far as to make the radical proposal that the utilitarian ethic that underlies present economic science should be replaced by a virtue ethic, in a variation upon Aristotelian virtue ethics.

What now? Where is the good and where the bad of capitalism and markets? Schumpeter distinguished between conduct of corporations and that of independent, new

entrepreneurs, coming from outside, and predicted that in the development of capitalism the latter would be replaced by the former. Here I adopt and develop that idea.

In my scientific and advisory work on innovation I ran into this contrast. One can distinguish between incremental innovation, with improvements on what exists, and the creative destruction of radical innovation. The latter entails what economists call radical uncertainty, as opposed to calculable risk. Under radical uncertainty one does not know what may happen. Economics as the science of rational choice cannot deal with such incalculable uncertainty which therefore is an extraneous, embarrassing phenomenon that is best ignored.

Radical innovation is not in the interest of established, large corporations, since it creatively destroys the economic value of their current investments. In many ways, large firms try to halt or slow down the creative destruction contrived by outsiders. For politics, the uncertainty of radical innovation also is an embarrassment, with eight out of ten projects not achieving their professed goal. Funding that is seen as largely funding failure. But it is in fact warranted, since the successes are worth the failures, and failures are a source of learning. However, this is difficult to sell in a society that has become pathologically averse to risk.

So, an unholy alliance arises between politics and large business, where corporations can exercise their lobbies, in funding incremental innovation in large firms. As a result, the obstacles are increased for radical innovation by the rebels, the outsiders.

Also, large-scale, concentrated business yields the excesses of unjustifiable remuneration, tax evasion, hiving off risks unto society, and the mutual embrace in what earlier in this blog I called 'system tragedy'.

Also, the shared avoidance of risk has yielded a pre-occupation with efficiency rather than quality and innovation, and an orientation towards detailed forms of control that are suffocating professional work and innovation.^{vii}

So, the compulsion and suffocation by the established order, constraining deviance and rebellion, derive from a degenerate form of capitalism.

243. Heidegger, Levinas, and more^{viii} published 27-1-2016

Heidegger and Levinas share the postmodern opposition to Enlightenment views of the rational, autonomous, disembodied subject, separated from the object, the world. The view here is that mind and spirit are embodied, and hence finite, in death. The subject is constituted by action in the world. Abstractions, concepts, are preceded and trumped by largely tacit, unconscious hunches and heuristics that are partly instinctive and partly cobbled on the fly.^{ix}

Concerning embodiment and identity, I recall a thesis offered in several items in this blog (e.g. 24). I employed the work of Antonio Damasio^x, according to whom in our brain we build different levels of representations in the form of neural connectivity, first of bodily processes, then of the world we act in, and then representations of representations that may constitute consciousness. I argued that what these levels of representation have in common is the body, in which they arise and connect. The body as a nexus of those representations is what gives some coherence in the form of identity, though it remains multiple, not fully coherent, even conflicting, and subject to shift, as mental construction and destruction proceeds.

Now, if there is no transcendence of God or Platonic ideas, is there any other pass beyond the finality of death?

According to Heidegger. In 'being thrown into the world', we live 'unto death', that is, death wakes us to live life authentically, seeking expression, creation, ecstasy. However, these are momentary, they come and go, and ultimately we crash into the blind wall of death, with no aperture to any beyond.

Here, one is reminded of Schopenhauer's view of the Will to exist, with desires that are never fully fulfilled, and if they were this would evoke an unbearable boredom.

In both Schopenhauer and Heidegger, ethics becomes aesthetics: seek art to escape the boredom of fulfilled desires or the itch of unfulfilled ones or grasps for authenticity.

Levinas does not accept this. According to him^{xi} there is a form of continuity in Discontinuity of the self, in fecundity, in having a child. The child continues one's identity without being identical.

I don't go along with this.^{xii} I grant that it may be part of a sense of continuity after death, But there is much more. There is also, and perhaps more importantly, cultural posterity. That may lie in medical care you gave to people, or in education or teaching, or in producing art, or laws, or in offering security. And so on.

This is quite simple and does not require philosophical contortionism.

ⁱ Bart Nooteboom, 2012, *Beyond humanism: The flourishing of life, self and other*, Palgrave MacMillan.

ⁱⁱ Mari Ruti, 2015, *Between Levinas and Lacan; Self, other, ethics*, Bloomsbury.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Mari Ruti, 2015, *Between Levinas and Lacan; Self, other, ethics'*, Bloomsbury.

^{iv} The same, p. 90.

^v The same, p. 133.

^{vi} Bart Nooteboom, 2014, paperback 2015, *How markets work and fail, and what to make of them*, Edward Elgar.

^{vii} I have been conceptually developing and promoting leaner, more trust-based forms of 'horizontal control'. See item75 in this blog.

^{viii} This item has been inspired and informed, in part, by Simon Critchley, *The problem with Levinas*, 2015, Oxford U. Press.

^{ix} For example, I am thinking here of the decision heuristics presented in social psychology, e.g. in the work of Kahneman.

^x In his *Self comes to mind*.

^{xi} In his *Totality and infinity*.

^{xii} Apart from the fact that Levinas talks only about father and son, leaving out mothers and girls. And what about childless people? Is there no hope for them?