



ENACTING LEVINAS'S INFINITE RESPONSIBILITY AS AN ETHICO-POLITICAL COMPROMISE

IMPLEMENTANDO A RESPONSABILIDADE INFINITA DE LEVINAS COMO UM COMPROMISSO ÉTICO-POLÍTICO

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Abstract. *Levinas's work does not offer us an ethical theory but seeks rather to describe a pre-originary ethical encounter with the other. Within this face-to-face encounter with the other, my subjectivity is held hostage because of an originary asymmetry between us. This ethical asymmetry produces an infinite responsibility to and for the other, in order that the singularity of the other be preserved. In order to moderate such a demanding position Levinas introduces the third party who restores justice by permitting ethical calculation. This marks a move from ethics to politics. Nonetheless, there remains a lacuna between ethics and politics. I argue for a reading of Levinas's claim that the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in order to posit infinite responsibility as the compromise of ethics with politics. I discuss some implications for business ethics, in particular CSR, in light of these findings.*

Keywords: *Levinas, ethics, politics, infinite responsibility, business ethics, CSR.*

Sumário. *A obra de Lévinas não nos oferece uma teoria ética, antes procura descrever um encontro ético pré-originário com o outro. Neste encontro face a face com o outro, a minha subjectividade torna-se refém por causa de uma assimetria original entre nós. Esta assimetria ética produz uma responsabilidade infinita pelo e para o outro, de modo a que a singularidade do outro possa ser preservada. Para moderar uma posição tão exigente como esta, Lévinas introduz um terceiro que restaura a justiça ao permitir o cálculo ético. Isto assinala uma passagem da ética para a política. Ainda assim, permanece uma lacuna entre ética e política. Defendo uma leitura da pretensão de Lévinas segundo a qual o terceiro é uma correcção da assimetria de proximidade de modo a afirmar a responsabilidade infinita como o compromisso da ética com a política. Discuto algumas implicações para a ética dos negócios, em particular CSR, à luz destas descobertas.*

Palavras-chave: *Levinas, Ética, política, responsabilidade infinita, Ética dos negócios, CSR.*

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0.Introduction

Perpich (2008; 3), following Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), describes the Enlightenment's moral question 'what ought I to do?' and Ancient Ethics' moral questions "How should one live?' and 'What is the best life for human beings?', as the "end points of a continuum along which normative ethical enquiry may run, depending on whether it is individual actions or the shape of a whole life that is most at issue." As a straightforward answer to these ethical questions, Emmanuel Levinas's notion of an infinite responsibility to, and for the other makes little sense. Levinas does not seek to outline an ethical system or offer any normative guidelines, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general, or what Critchley (1999; 3) has called the "primordial ethical experience".

This primordial ethical experience is to be found in the face-to-face encounter with the other, wherein the other holds my subjectivity hostage because of an originary asymmetry between us (Levinas 1969). This ethical asymmetry produces an infinite responsibility to and for the other, in order to preserve the singularity of the other. However such a demanding ethics needs moderating. Levinas (2001; 165-6) himself acknowledges that if only the other and I existed then

I would have had nothing but obligations! But [...] there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my fellow. Hence, it is important to me to know which of the two takes precedence [...] must not human beings, who are incomparable, be compared? Thus justice here, takes precedence over the taking upon oneself of the fate of the other".

Justice is, for Levinas (1988; 171), "a calculation, which is knowledge, and which supposes politics; it is inseparable from the political. It is something which I distinguish from ethics, which is primary."

Levinas's insistence on the primacy of ethics is to safeguard the singularity of the other in this process of reducing the Other to the same (which he calls 'totalisation') in order that the other can be compared with other others and a response calculated. Critchley (1999; 223) remarks that for Levinas, "ethics is ethical for the sake of politics – that is, for the sake of a new conception of the organization of political space". In other words, being infinitely responsible for the other means that we must strive to preserve the singularity of the other in the

very processes and spaces where the singularity of the other is in danger of being effaced. What follows from this is that “between ethics and politics there is a ‘hiatus’, a ‘lacuna’ and yet ethics calls for politics [...] ethics and politics call for each other on the basis of their non-relation” (Raffoul 1998; 280).

In this paper I will attempt to make the case for an understanding of Levinasian infinite responsibility as the compromise between ethics and politics. Central to the idea of a compromise is the necessity of concessions. Levinas (1998; 158) says that “the relationship with the third party [the political] is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity [i.e. the face to face encounter]”. I will argue that this correction can be understood as the concession the ethical must make to the political in order to safeguard the singularity of the other in the process of recognizing and respecting the singularity of the other in the presence of the third party.

The paper proceeds as follows: I start by outlining Levinas's ethics, focusing on his notion of infinite responsibility as a response to the ‘proximity’ of the other. The section thereafter examines how Levinas's introduction of the third party to the face to face encounter facilitates his move to politics. I will then argue for infinite responsibility as the compromise between the ethical and the political.

I conclude the paper in a section that transposes the discussion to the field of business ethics. In particular I discuss the recent ‘political turn’ in CSR (corporate social responsibility).

1. The other and infinite responsibility

Traditional morality has it that answering standard ethical questions such as ‘why be good?’ or ‘what is the right thing to do?’ requires reasons and arguments to support any moral claims made. Arriving at these reasons requires, inter alia, an impartialism between two or more moral agents and their means. Impartialism in turn amounts to “a perspective of impartiality, impersonality, objectivity, and universality” (Alford 2001: 149) between moral agents. Levinas (1969; 39) characterizes the impartialist perspective as an “imperialism of the same”. What Levinas means by this is that impartialism seeks to reduce everything that is different, or Other, to the same, so that they can be systemized into a body of knowledge and spoken about. Levinas calls this reduction of the

Other to the same a ‘totalization’. What is unique and singular about another individual is lost when we try to ‘thematize’ or categorize the Other¹. Levinas refers to the singularity of the other as the alterity of the other. Levinas argues that the only way to maintain the alterity of the other in the totality of knowing, that is, to avoid the reduction to the same, is to posit the other as infinite; hence the title of Levinas’s major work, *Totality and Infinity* (1969). The subtitle, ‘An Essay on Exteriority’, locates the Other, as infinite, outside of this totality. How is this possible? Levinas (1969; 49) adapts Descartes’ third meditation, zeroing in on the idea of infinity, which is exceptional, he argues, in that “its *ideatum* surpasses its idea”. Levinas continues: “the distance that separates *ideatum* and idea constitutes the content of the *ideatum* itself”, and as such, the other “is the sole *ideatum* of which there can only be an idea in us; it is infinitely removed from its idea, that is, exterior, because it is infinite” (ibid.).²

Levinas takes this structure as a model for the alterity of the other. The other’s mode of presenting herself, “the exceeding of *the idea of the other in me*”, Levinas calls ‘face’ (50). Levinas goes onto to say that “the being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height” (215). In other words, the face to face encounter is marked by a radical asymmetry. The reason for this asymmetry is that any attempt by me to represent the other would be a first step towards her totalisation. I can never be certain that my representation of the alterity of the other matches her presentation of her alterity as face. I can never be certain what the other requires of me. This asymmetrical relationship I have with the other, “who cannot be resolved into ‘images’ or be exposed in a theme”, Levinas labels ‘proximity’ (1989; 89).

In *Substitution*, Levinas (1989; 90) ties proximity to exteriority (and *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise Than Being*):

The relationship of proximity cannot be reduced to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, nor to the simple ‘representation’ of a neighbour; it is already an assignation [...] an obligation anachronously prior to any commitment. This anteriority is ‘older’ than the *a priori* [...] The relationship with exteriority is ‘prior’ to the act that would effect it.

¹ ‘Other’, with a capital, will refer to otherness in general, or alterity; while ‘other’ will refer to the personal other, the other person.

² An ideatum is the external object around which an idea (or concept) forms. In the case of the idea of infinity, the ideatum is the paradoxical object which must both include and exceed itself.

But how is proximity already an assignation? How can the subject be affected “without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation”? (*ibid.*). Perpich (2009; 87) rephrases these questions as “how does the face of the other command me or concern me?” We can also ask, ‘How can the face signify the ethical demands of the other?’ Levinas (1985; 85) answers that “access to the face is straightaway ethical”; “the face is signification, and signification without context” (86); that is, without categories and representative themes. Elsewhere, Levinas (2001; 48) says that the face “is an appeal or an imperative given to your responsibility: to encounter a face is straightaway to hear a demand and an order”.

This summons to responsibility by the face just means that my subjectivity is hostage to the other: “the I is a privilege and an election [by the other]” (1969; 245), which is in turn, one more formulation of Levinas’s definition of ethics as “the calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other”(43). Does this mean, as Alford (2004; 153) asks, “that ethics is better than freedom?” No, what this means is that my autonomy is validated in responding to the other (*ibid.*). Levinas calls this, ‘freedom invested’ (1969; 302-4), which Perpich (2008; 91) explains as follows: “my freedom is put into question and ‘invested’ as goodness.”

I am because I am called by the other, and thus I am infinitely responsible to the other. Infinite responsibility arises because of the asymmetry between the other and I in the face to face encounter. I try to faithfully represent the other and her demands without reducing her into a totality of like and same but only the other can present her alterity, as face. But infinite responsibility goes further, it also means that “I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others “(1985; 99).

At this point, Levinas will concede that these are “extreme formulas which must not be detached from their context” (*ibid.*). The compromise with politics is put forward: “in the concrete, many other considerations intervene and require justice even for me. Practically, the law sets certain consequences out of the way” (*ibid.*). It is, however, important to note that this compromise with politics does

not mean that Levinas gives up his “utopian and, for an I, inhuman conception”; he still holds that “subjectivity as such is *initially* hostage; it answers to the point of expiating for others” (100). (Emphasis added).

Next, I explore the parameters of the intervening practicalities and then expand on the Levinasian ethico-politico compromise.

2. The third party and ethico-politico compromise

To recall the citation in the introduction, Levinas (1998; 104) acknowledges that we “don’t live in a world in which there is but one single ‘first comer’; there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my fellow.” The import of this is that, in the words of Alford (2004; 156), “the introduction of the third, saves us from being consumed by the infinite need of the other.” This is because I am too an other; I am other to another other. I can restrict the infinite demands made on me by the other by pointing to the other other (including myself) who requires my attention, failing which I fail to respect their alterity. However, we are still in a quandary, because while “theoretically my obligation to each is infinite; practically that cannot be. How to parse the difference?” (164).

Alford remarks that Levinas will not answer this because that would require some kind of universal ethics (or impartialism) (*ibid.*). Levinas himself has said his “task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning” (1985; 90). Levinas’s terminology can be confusing at this point; by ‘constructing ethics’, he means normative guidelines, which in return requires calculation. Critchley (1999; 3-4) notes that Levinas sometimes speaks of this distinction, between constructing ethics and ethics’ meaning,

in terms of the difference between the ethical and the moral (although he is not consistent on this point), where the latter refers to ‘the socio-political order of recognizing and improving our human survival’ which is itself founded upon the *prima philosophia* of an ethical responsibility to the other.

In *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Critchley (*ibid.*) stipulates that he will use a “distinction between ethics and *politics*”, where politics refers to the moral (or ‘constructing ethics’). I will follow Critchley’s convention.

The central way in which Levinas ‘parses the difference’ between infinite responsibility in theory and practice is through temporality. Levinas (1969; 213) says that the third does not arrive *after* the other in the face to face encounter but

is already there in the encounter with the other: “It is not that there first would be face, and then the being it manifests, or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face *qua* face opens humanity”. That is to say, each face, representing the singularity of the other, recalls the singularity of every other other, including myself. As such, remarks Jordaan (2009; 97), “every person I come across is both the other and the third to me. Every person I come across is both a general and equal other with whom I stand in a political relation as well as a specific other who summons me to responsibility in the ethical relation”. The Other and the third are coterminous and contemporaneous.

And yet, as noted before, I can only respond to any one demand at a time, I can only face one other at a time. Jordaan (*ibid*) reframes this dilemma we have already spoken about:

When faced by the other, I can respond *politically*, seeing the other as my equal, restricting my responsibility to him, insisting on a reciprocity and equality between us, and asserting my rights against his; or I can respond *ethically* by being concerned and assuming responsibility for him beyond what is required by our political equality and reciprocity. *Do I relate to the other ethically or politically?* I am constantly faced with this choice. (Emphasis added)

While Jordaan in the main captures what Critchley (1999; 225) calls the “double structure of community”, his use of the disjunction ‘or’ can be misleading because, Critchley continues, the “passage from the ethical to the political is not a passage of time, but rather a doubling of discourse whereby a response to the singularity of the Other’s face is, at the same time a response to community [as] a commonality”, that is, as a group of equals.” To put it simply, as Wolff (2011; 21), “ethics necessarily passes into politics, or in fact, that ethics has always already passed into politics”. Politics can be said to be the *enactment* of the Levinasian primordial ethical relation while ethics is the *thinking* of the Levinasian primordial ethical relation (Woermann 2016; 133). Politics can thus be characterised, in the words of Critchley (2004; 178), as “the art of a response to the singular demand of the other”. That is to say my response to the demand of the other will of necessity also be a response to the third in that my response will have been a political calculation that takes into consideration its simultaneous effect on both the other and the third.

If this so then, argues Wolff (2011; 25), “political responsibility’ is a pleonasm.” My infinite (ethical) responsibility for the other is *also* a finite

(political) responsibility for the third, or rather my political responsibility for the third is contained in my ethical responsibility for the other, so that “[p]eace, or responsibility, to the near one, the neighbour, is peace to the one far off, the third party”(Critchley 1999; 223). The third, argues Levinas (1998; 157) “is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?” This is why Critchley (1999; 223) claims that “politics provides the continual horizon of Levinasian ethics”. Politics as the limit of responsibility does not imply “ethics [as]necessarily a restraint on power – i.e. one where politics comes first and then ethics evaluates it later – [rather] politics is the machinery through which the ethical demand can be responded to” (McMurray et al. 2010; 546).

It is at this point that I want to make the case that politics as the ‘art of a response to the Other’, as the ‘machinery’ of the ethical, as the ‘horizon and limit’ of ethics, can be made sense of by a particular reading of Levinas’s(1998; 158) remark that “the relationship with the third party is an *incessant correction* of the asymmetry of proximity.” (Emphasis added). By now it is a quick step to note that ‘the relationship with the third party’ just refers to the political, while ‘proximity’, to recall, refers to my relationship with the Other, “who cannot be ...exposed in a theme” (1989;89), that is, the primordial ethical relationship of the face to face. Substituting these phrases into the citation above then produces the formulation ‘the political is the *incessant correction* of the ethical’. It is this ‘incessant correction’ that I want to characterize precisely as a compromise.

The OED defines a compromise(n) as both a settlement reached by making concessions, and ‘an intermediate state between conflicting alternatives’³. As the (Levinasian) ethical calls for an infinite responsibility, such a call can only be realized in practice as a compromise, as a concession of my resources and abilities between the Other and the third. Levinas (1969; 244) himself says “infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed”. Perpich (2008; 89) takes this to mean that

the better I accomplish my obligations, the more demands I find addressed to me. It is not a matter of the actual number of demands increasing, but a matter

³ See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/compromise>

of my sensitivity increasing so that the demands and injustices of which I was formerly unaware now come to press and weigh on my conscience.

In other words my infinite *responsibility* is incessantly being corrected by my *response-ability* to the other, which is also a simultaneously a response to the other other.

One citation in the introduction had it that between “ethics and politics there is a ‘hiatus’, a ‘lacuna’ (Raffoul 1998; 280). It is my reading that infinite responsibility should be understood exactly as this lacuna between ethics and politics. A hiatus/lacuna can in turn be understood as an ‘intermediate state’, that is, as a compromise (forming the second part of the definition of compromise used above). Levinasian infinite responsibility can thus also be understood as an ethico-politico compromise.

3. Some implications for Business Ethics⁴

After the above explication of the compromise of ethics and politics in Levinas, I now move to considering some implications such an understanding might have for the sub-discipline of business ethics. The compromise required between ethics and politics is succinctly posed in the question addressed to business ethicists by Martin Parker (2003; 198) in ‘Ethics, Politics and Organizing’. He ask business ethicists to consider “why they don’t call their discipline ‘business politics?’” instead of business ethics. In not so doing argues Parker (189), they justify themselves as “properly concerned with ‘ethics’ and [so] avoid the troubling pro-managerial hegemony of the wider discipline”. In turn they use the term ‘ethics’ to frame questions and answers in generally individualistic ways which tend to exclude any sustained examination of the organizational contexts and power structures individuals find themselves operating in (ibid). Thus, Parker (197) continues, “because business ethics asks ‘how can people in organizations be good?’ it does not often ask ‘how can business

⁴ ‘Applying’ Levinas to business ethics is a popular activity, however, paper after paper within this literature includes the inevitable caveat that doing so is a fraught enterprise because, inter alia, applying ethics is just another form of totalisation (see for example the articles in the 2007 special edition on Levinas and business ethics in *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 16(3)). As the move from ethics to politics I discuss in this paper is considered to be a rubric to ‘applying’ Levinasian ethics, I believe I have heeded the necessary caveats.

be part of a good polis?” I will briefly explore this concern through considering a central business ethics issue – corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Discussions of CSR typically start by contrasting the views of Milton Friedman on the one hand and proponents of stakeholder theory on the other (Jones et al. 2005; 97). The former’s views can be directly gleaned in the title of his seminal 1970 essay ‘The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits’; while the latter grouping is usually represented by Edward Freeman (1984) who argues that business has a responsibility to a wider set of stakeholders beyond the shareholders, and thus profit maximization is not the only, or even most important responsibility of business.

Friedman’s position is often misrepresented and taken out of context, because although advocating for business to make as much money as possible, he emphasizes that this must be done “while conforming to the basic rules of society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in ethical custom” (1970; 33). This common misrepresentation notwithstanding, Jones et al. (2005; 99) nonetheless give a very charitable reading of Friedman. They argue that Friedman does not reject legal and ethical responsibility because he thinks it unimportant, but because business operates within a particular context and “that context –civil society and the political institutions it generates and ethical expectations it produces – is not and *should* not be a matter of corporate control or governance” (*ibid.*).

The CSR literature is vast, with several splits occurring over the decades since Friedman’s article⁵. It is not my intention to critically analyse this literature or to even provide an overview beyond the two opposing positions outlined above. Instead, I touch on what Scherer et al. (2016) call the ‘political turn’ in the CSR literature during the past decade. Part of the reason for this interest is the increasing scope of globalization which has in turn increased the power of the MNC (multi-national corporation) both within and across national borders (Scherer et al. 2009). As such the societal context in which business operates, and the ethical expectations this produces, has changed dramatically since Friedman wrote about business in 1970. Business provides more and more public goods

⁵ For a comprehensive overview see Agle et al. (2008).

(water, communications, education) and shapes public policy – Facebook and media for example. A corporate responsibility to ensure that the privacy concerns of its customers is honoured has turned into a political responsibility to ensure that nefarious agents do not subvert democratic processes. The recent Facebook imbroglio is just the latest and most urgent exemplar of why PCSR (political CSR) is needed.

Scherer et al. (2016; 275) note that the term PCSR brings together two highly contested concepts – the ‘political’ and ‘CSR’ – and as such PCSR should be understood as an ‘umbrella concept’. Scherer et al. (ibid.) cite Frynas and Stephens (2015; 485) definition of PCSR “as activities where CSR has an intended or unintended political impact”. However, their definition is rejected precisely because they fail to define the ‘political’. It seems then, that what the political entails cannot be bracketed from CSR, even under an umbrella concept such as PCSR. Scherer et al. (2016; 276) argue that “public deliberations, collective decisions, and the provision of public goods” are key features of the political and as such define PCSR as “responsible business activities that turn corporations into political actors, by engaging in public deliberations, collective decisions, and the provision of public goods or the restriction of public bads” (*ibid.*).

My intention is not to challenge such a definition of what constitutes the political and thus to demarcate a sphere of enquiry that would circumscribe PCSR, if indeed such a concept is theoretically feasible. I note rather that public *deliberations* and collective *decisions* constitute a calculation, an attempt to compare and weigh certain categories and themes with others. As such, Scherer et al.’s notion of the political is congruent with what I have argued in this paper is the claim of the third party in conjunction with the other in the face to face encounter. In order to do justice to both the other and the third the I must *deliberate* and *choose*, even as the I’s freedom to do so is resisted by the asymmetry of proximity. I have described that dynamic as the ethico-politico compromise that constitutes infinite responsibility. If the claim made in the previous section by Wolff (2011; 21), following Levinas, that “ethics necessarily passes into politics”, holds true, then *a fortiori* so does the claim, *business ethics* necessarily passes into *business politics*. As such CSR will also necessarily pass into PCSR.

4. Conclusion

This paper has put forward the claim that Levinas's notion of infinite responsibility can be usefully understood as an ethico-political compromise, where the ethical describes the pre-originary, and asymmetrical encounter with the other, and the political the contemporaneous presence of the third within that encounter which necessitates the need for calculation and comparison. I have indicated just one instance – the business ethics field, in particular the concept of PCSR – in which this finding can be put to use. Future research might productively use this insight for other applied ethics problematics in the field of environmental or information ethics for example, which in both cases will require calculation and compromise.

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