

Relevance of Levinas' Notion of Inter-Subjectivity to the Ethical Dimension of Common Social Behaviours in Contemporary Africa

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to determine the relevance of Levinas' notion of ethical intersubjectivity to certain patterns of ethical behaviour currently in vogue in Africa. In particular, the paper examines behaviours that one could classify as: stony silence when a greeting seems in place, the reluctance to converse with others, the failure to be honest, the tendency to be inhospitable, the unwillingness to share, the unbridled drive to possess, the refusal to be available to others, the habitual misuse of language, and inattentiveness to the needs of others... these are unseemly behaviours that are unsettling.

To attain the main objective of this paper, it will be necessary to carry out three major tasks. The first will be to arrive at a basic understanding of Levinas' idea of ethical intersubjectivity. This task is important because it sets the context and introduces the issues that the paper will address. The second major task will be to identify some unethical behaviours that are currently quite attention-getting in Africa today. This task is important because it constitutes the social matrix in Africa that stands in need of a solution. It is within this matrix that Levinas' ethical intersubjectivity is studied. The last major task will be to determine the relevance of Levinas' ideas to unethical behaviours prevailing on the continent. This task is crucial because it constitutes the core of this study. Throughout the course of this study, I shall be garnering

data from the works of Levinas, mainly from his *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. by A. Lingis), from the group of scholars such as R. Burggraeve, S. Critchley, and A. Peperzak who have commented on his work, and from scholars such as A. Palmer, T.R. Tyler, and L.K. Trevino who have explored the ethical behaviours mentioned.

The paper argues that Levinas' ethical insight into intersubjectivity provides some answers to some of the ethical problems emerging on the continent because his insight brings to light the nobility of imminent humanism. Imminent humanism is a philosophy of ethical intersubjectivity and human social responsiveness. Levinas posits a kind of ethics that opens up a new avenue for transcendence that involves an extensive investigation into the face-to-face relationships between people. For Levinas, one's encounter with the face of the other "is an appeal or an imperative given to your responsibility: to encounter a face is straightaway to hear a demand and an order."¹

It is now necessary for the sake of clarity to establish Levinas' location within history and to introduce into the discussion the definitions of the key terms that are essential to understanding the pivotal issues in the present essay.

1. Establishing the Conceptual Context

1.1 Who Is Emmanuel Levinas?

Emmanuel Levinas was born on the 12th of January, 1906, at Kovno in the Russian Empire (present-day Kaunas, Lithuania) into a traditional Jewish family. He was the eldest child of a middle-class family and had two brothers named Boris and Aminadab.²

Levinas is considered as a man of three cultures, Jewish, Russian and French. This is evident from his life background: he was born into a Jewish family, lived his childhood in the Russian empire and later on assumed French citizenship. Despite being a Jew by birth, he is famously known as a French philosopher, belonging to the existentialist school of philosophy.

¹ D. PERPICH, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 50.

² Cf. S. CRITCHLEY – R. BERNASCONI, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, xv.

1.2 Ethical Intersubjectivity

The term intersubjectivity can be generally viewed as a scheme of recurrence whereby two or more individuals share meanings, insights, viewpoints, feelings, motives, purposes, intentions, experiences or actions. Intersubjectivity is in motion when one invites the other into his or her personal sphere of freedom, self-determination, self-governance and self-possession. So, it consists of an interaction or sharing of subjective experiences. Ethical intersubjectivity implies the intimate or close relationship that the two parties share in common – a relationship that accords with the norms of goodness and truth.³ In such a kind of interaction or relationship, the two parties respect and value the dignity of each other as human persons. According to Levinas, a healthy ethical intersubjective relationship obtains only when both parties recognize the uniqueness (the irreplaceability, irreducibility and the unrepeatability) of each other. It is achieved when there is no hidden agenda between the *I* and the *Other*. For Levinas such a state is realized in an asymmetrical encounter as we are going to establish presently.

1.3 Ethical Behaviour

By ethical behaviour the study refers to actions which are consistent with what a society and the individual typically think are proper and of good values.⁴ The propriety and the goodness of the values become more firmly embedded in the truth if they accord with the data of divine revelation. It means those actions which demonstrate respect to the key ethical principles that include: honesty, fairness, equality, diversity, purity of heart and body, the

³ "Parties" here mean two human individuals who share a common issue as the basis of their relationship.

⁴ Those actions should not be based on one's inclinations or sentiments, but rather should be construed as good by any rational person. The editor notes that the deciding voice for what is rational belongs to the one who created the human capacity to reason. Rational persons call the Creator of reason, God (Allah).

right to life and dignity from the moment of conception and all other individual rights.⁵

1.4 Contemporary Africa

By contemporary Africa the paper refers to the period of African history that extends from the 1990s to the present.

2. Levinas' Ideas on Ethical Intersubjectivity

Having explained in cursory fashion the key concepts in this paper, the study will now in this section examine Levinas' ideas on ethical intersubjectivity.

2.1 The Exigency of the Same and the Other

In developing his notion of an ethical human relationship, Levinas introduces the terms the *Same* and the *Other*.⁶ At times Levinas identifies them as interlocutors. In fact, according to Levinas, without the interlocutors there is no ethics, no humanity as such. By the *Same* Levinas refers to the *self*, the *I*, or an individual existent who defines his own existence. On the contrary, by the *Other* Levinas implies the other human being whom the *I* or the *Same* encounters. According to Levinas, without the intervention of the other individual, the *I* can never obtain salvation, that is, the ethical mode of living what is an authentic human life. Salvation, Levinas insists, can never come from within, but from elsewhere, from outside, from the other person.⁷

For Levinas then, the other human being is different from me; as he puts it, the *Other* "is far from me and other than myself, a stranger, and I cannot be sure of what this strangeness may conceal [...]. Even if he comes with no ill will, he remains a stranger inhabiting an alien world of his own."⁸ It is because of

⁵ <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/ethical-behavior.html>, accessed on 19th November, 2018.

⁶ In this Essay, the terms: *Same* and *Other* are used with their first letter capitalized because of the special connotation they hold for Levinas – they refer to human persons.

⁷ E. LEVINAS, *From Existence to Existent*, 93, 159.

⁸ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 13.

being separated, different from me, that the *Other* becomes able to challenge my mode of existence.

In his work, *From Existence to Existent*, Levinas seems to liken the *Other* with the future. Here is his existential attitude towards the future:

The real future is what is to come of itself, and that it escapes our grasp even while being sensed is essential to it. The future is what can surprise us. It is then not what we apprehend already, but that of which we are apprehensive, that which threatens and promises.⁹

Levinas admits that, an individual may exercise some power over his neighbour. However, that is only possible in an attempt to reduce the *Other* to the *Same*. This attempt is inauthentic. In order to establish a genuine human encounter there must be a real response of the *I* to his interlocutor. This seems to be what Levinas means when he writes: "I must be ready to put my world into words, and to offer it to the other. There can be no free interchange without something to give."¹⁰

In Section Three of *Totality and Infinity* entitled "Face and Exteriority", Levinas describes how the *Other*, in his or her concrete emergence as another person who faces me and speaks to me, reveals to me the injustice of my self-enclosure. In Levinas' line of thought, both the *Same* and the *Other* appear exterior to and independent from each other and thus form a "constellation that is neither a totality nor a pure dispersion without connections".¹¹ Levinas describes this constellation as a non-relational relation, an ethical conversion, a pure intersubjective encounter. Levinas emphatically insists that, at the ethical conversion initiated by the emergence of the *Other*, my first concern is no longer losing my own life but depriving another of his own - the self's fear of its own death is replaced by a fear that one is going to "murder" the *Other*.¹²

⁹ E. LEVINAS, *Existence and Existent*, 6.

¹⁰ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 14.

¹¹ A. PEPPERZAK, *To the Other*, 1993, 121.

¹² E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 144.

Levinas emphasizes that, “It is only in approaching the *Other* that I attend to myself.”¹³ That is to say, by attending to the call of my neighbour I also attend to myself, I pass from phenomenon to being, I acquire meaning for my existence. The encounter between the *I* and the interlocutor is a concrete and actual one, and so, it is essentially an existential act apart from being a metaphysical move towards transcendence.¹⁴

In other words, we could say that the *I* needs the transcendent *Other* to reveal his autonomous ego-state as insufficient, to make him realize that, his existence as an ego is not as perfect as he first thought it to be. In Levinas’ conviction, without the intervention of the other person, the *Same* would never come to the realization of its own ego-centeredness; it would never attain salvation. Without the *Other’s* mediation, the *I* is doomed to remain self-centred.¹⁵ Thus, an upsetting encounter with the interlocutor makes the *self* come to the realization of its genuine human relationship and so makes social relations (ethics according to the parameters of goodness and truth) possible.

Over the past century perhaps up to the present time, Levinas’ ethical explication has earned a well-deserved reputation. However, a challenge I find in his work is how to address the question of the tragedy of human finiteness. Levinas himself admits the limiting character of thermatization:¹⁶ “In relating to a being in the opening of being, comprehension locates a signification on the basis of being. In this sense, it does not invoke a being, but only names it, thus accomplishing violence and a negation; a partial negation which is violence.”¹⁷ Levinas believes that the one I meet is in fact beyond the body that I am

¹³ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 178.

¹⁴ It is not difficult to discern here a degree of similarity between Levinas’ notions and those of Martin Buber in his understanding of the I-Thou relationship. (Editor’s note)

¹⁵ R.J.S. MANNING, “Thinking the Other without Violence”, Available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/25669991?seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents, Accessed on 25 Jan 2018.

¹⁶ Thermatization implies an act of viewing a thing as a phenomenon.

¹⁷ E. LEVINAS, *The Levinas Reader*, 127.

capable of seeing, touching, defining or naming.¹⁸ But, as far as human nature is concerned, thermatization can hardly be avoided for there is no way I can meet someone with no body.

Nevertheless Levinas' exposition is crucial in understanding and safeguarding one's encounter with the other. It in fact offers the best option, I think, for addressing the growing complexity in ethical behaviour in the milieu of contemporary Africa. For instance, one considers the lack of conversation: our contemporary Africa has been preoccupied with the electronic gadgets to the extent that, some rarely pay attention to the concrete person of encounter. Phubbing is all too common.

2.2 Asymmetrical Relationship: An Essential for Levinasian Ethical Inter-subjectivity

The Levinasian phenomenological description of intersubjective relationship is built upon an analysis of concrete living in the world. He tells us that, at the moment of encounter, the *I* is not expected to hold any presupposition regarding the meeting. We could say, it should be a fresh and original encounter in all its aspects. There should not be any expectation in anticipation of the encounter. Such relation Levinas calls asymmetrical.¹⁹

To put it differently, the relationship between the interlocutors is asymmetrical given that the *I* as the subject of the encounter takes no advantage of the *Other*. Within the social matrix of contemporary Africa, most often the relationship has declined into one of give and take. Such an encounter presupposes expectation: when one performs his/her duty for the other, he/she expects the same or at least a reward of some kind from him/her. That is why we say that our relationship in contemporary Africa is far from giving for the sake of duty. It is a symmetrical encounter and not asymmetrical as Levinas intends.²⁰

¹⁸ E. LEVINAS, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 86.

¹⁹ E. LEVINAS, *Time and the Other*, 108.

²⁰ The editor notes that *Africa Tomorrow* readers may recognize the symmetrical encounter described here as an attachment to the materialist school of suspicion. An analysis of the psychosocial and prestige/power schools of suspicion could very well reveal the same kind of symmetrical

Apparently, *I* can constitute the other person cognitively, on the basis of vision, as an *alter ego*. I can see that another human being is like me, acts like me, and appears to be the master of his or her conscious life. As S. Critchley observes, this seems to have been Edmund Husserl's basic phenomenological approach of constituting other people within a shared social universe. Critchley writes: "In Husserlian terms, the domain of the same includes not only the intentional acts of consciousness, or noeses, but also the intentional objects which gives meaning to those acts, or noemata."²¹ But according to Levinas, Husserl's constitution lacks the core element of intersubjective life.²² For Levinas, the stranger does not even have to utter words in order for the *I* to feel the summons implicit in his approach. He is not another *I*. In the moment of encountering him or her, it is as if *I* were responsible for his or her mortality, and guilty for surviving as Levinas writes, "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the Others."²³ It is for that reason that the subject, instead, falls into infinite debt in a situation of utterly asymmetrical obligations. The subjective *I* infinitely owes him or her everything, while he/she owes me nothing. Levinas maintains, in other words, that intersubjectivity is formed in and through the *I*'s subjection to the *Other* in a concrete and immediate mode of encounter.²⁴

2.3 The Face: Beginning of Discourse

It is a self-evident fact that, in ordinary understanding, the face is the front part of the person's head from the chin to the forehead. It is an important part of the human being for it is an information centre, the location for expressions and emotions that are capable

encounters: one is committing one's heart to drives for gratification, power and prestige that come as paybacks for one's "successful" encounters with an Other.

²¹ S. CRITCHLEY – R. BERNASCONI, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 15.

²² This is not true, however, of Husserl's disciples. In her *Problem of Empathy*, Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) makes it clear that her phenomenology does not lack the core element of intersubjective life. (Editor's Note)

²³ E. LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 146.

²⁴ E. LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 117.

of indicating the character of a person.²⁵ It is by means of the face one can be described as happy, sad, sick and the like. In fact, the eye of the *Other* may very well be the door through which one can enter or break through the mask or the form. However, in his ethics Levinas does not limit his understanding of the face to the phenomenon of experience as a physical, ethnic or aesthetic object. He at times uses the word *visage* to refer to the *face*, which signifies the first, usual, unreflective encounter with the *Other*, the face as a living presence: the face itself speaks.²⁶

A discourse, as Levinas understands it, is the system of interaction whereby meaning is derived from the face of the *Other*, "the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the face, which is accomplished in being situated in height with respect to us."²⁷ The epiphany of the interlocutor draws my attention, his face demands response. By responding or speaking to him or her I enter into a relationship. Levinas expresses that, for a discourse to be realistic, it should not be planned *a priori*. That is to say, a conversation needs no prearranged agenda. Everything unfolds as the one presents or reveals himself or herself. So, I am never sure of what the Other will say. However, my autonomy remains intact even during the encounter with the interlocutor.

Hence, for Levinas, a discourse is not a simple fabrication of thought, but "an original relation with exterior being."²⁸ It is not a mere assemblage of wordings but an expression of the *Other* through eye contact as he reveals himself through verbal and nonverbal signals. That actually signifies the person's very novelty – letting one express oneself. But signification does not arise merely from the need or desire of the self for exteriority, or from the self's perception that he or she is lacking something; rather is derived from the signs revealed by the interlocutor in speaking about the world. For Levinas the face is not only what I 'see' by

²⁵ B. YOUNG, *Emmanuel Levinas and "the face of the Other"* Available at <http://english.byu.edu/faculty/youngb/levinas/face.pdf> [accessed 14 Jan 2018].

²⁶ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 66.

²⁷ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 67.

²⁸ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 66.

my naked eyes at the moment of encounter; the face may also escape my sight.

Having offered some insights into the nature of ethical intersubjectivity in the thought of Levinas, in the next section I will present some unethical behaviours that exist in Africa today. This essay claims that if these aspects (such as lack of hospitality, lack of conversation, and dishonesty) are not recognized as challenges to intersubjectivity, there can be a high risk of losing not only our dignity as human beings, but also our cultural values as Africans.

3. Some Unethical Behaviours in Africa Today

3.1 Lack of the Effort to Give Greetings

In Africa, the greeting was one of the most important things that a person could do. A quick saying “hello” followed with a handshake is a proper way to make a sufficient positive impression with anyone. However, such a value is gradually decreasing in our contemporary time. Nowadays, it is slowly becoming a common habit for people to pass each other by without giving a greeting. Sometimes one will greet you only when he/she knows you, or at least if you have (or will have) some impact on his/her life. No wonder these days, when you greet someone, you will simply be looked at, and the one moves or continues with his business. Sometimes people say, “Why should I greet him/her?... Of what help is that to me?” By the way the answer is always the same (“I am okay” or “I am good”) and that’s all! Certainly, the challenge in giving greetings in our time is the wonderment a person can feel when he or she greets someone and the other does not respond. Consequently, the value of greetings is slowly deteriorating in our contemporary Africa.

3.2 Lack of Conversation and Behaviour that Isolates

Our contemporary Africa faces the consequences brought about by technological advances. Often people are so preoccupied with electronic devices that they are completely oblivious to their immediate neighbour be it at home, during leisure moments outside the house, or even in work places. We tend to value much more the digitalized person or the anonymous audience than the concrete

person on one's side. People rarely share live experiences through personal encounters.²⁹

3.3 Attenuation of Honesty

Honesty and trust should not be confused for they are not the same thing. While honesty signifies the act of expressing the truth or exercising loyalty to the truth, trust denotes a belief that you have in another person. Trust can be measured as a degree of reliance on another person's habitual readiness to express the truth and fulfil promises. So, someone who is honest and keeps promises makes himself/herself trustworthy. In our contemporary Africa we experience such values of honesty and trustworthiness as being undermined or not lived at all. The problem prevails even among the very closest relatives or friends; it has become common to find someone saying he/she does not trust so and so. This is because such person has never been honest in word or deed, so that one makes himself/herself not to be trusted. Hence honesty has become an issue in our time.

3.4 Growing Attitude of Material Possession

The spirit of accumulation of wealth is another sickness in our contemporary world. The gap between *have* and *have not* is gradually increasing. Most of us are so preoccupied with property that the dignity of the other person succumbs to our desire for wealth. Wealth becomes more important than the life of a human being. You find someone rich (at least someone who has all the essentials such as food, shelter, and clothing) but his/her immediate neighbour sleeps with an empty stomach and lives in the slums. If this problem is not addressed as soon as possible, we will lose our sense of being human, being there for others. In fact, the spirit of possession or the love of material things to the detriment of our fellow human beings results in a manifold of other unethical behaviours including the unwillingness to love, the failure to care, and the refusal to respect others. Hence, we lose our value as human persons.

²⁹ For a discussion on phubbing, see R. RICHARD, J. & GIBSON, "Internet Involvement: Heart Poison for the University Student?"

Having made some brief comments about emerging ethical problems in our contemporary Africa, we shift our discussion to Levinas' thought on ethical inter-subjectivity and how his thought can help us cultivate ethical inclinations and habits that motivate us to behave with love, care and respect towards our fellow human beings.

4. Levinas' Ethical Intersubjectivity: It's Relevance for Some Unethical Habits Emerging in Africa Today

4.1 On the Value of Greetings

We have seen in the previous section that in our Africa of today many do not consider greetings as paramount during the time of encounter. Hence, greetings lose their value. When he probes the implications of the asymmetrical relationship, on the other hand, Levinas urges us not to anticipate consequences. We should always play our part with a personal openness to the Other who is playing his/her part. For Levinas, ethics begins at the moment of concrete encounter; and usually the greeting is the gateway to every conversation, be it formal or informal. If there is no proper greeting, obviously we do not expect healthy conversation. Thus, as Africans, we need to revitalize the value of greetings and so concretize our respect for Levinas' caution for a better Africa.

4.2 On the Failure to Converse and Cocooning Behaviour

One of the stiffest challenges posed by progress in technology is the absence of genuine conversation and the increasing tendency to self-isolation. Conversation in the strict sense of the term is a face-to-face dialogue, where the interlocutors face each other and are able not only to hear each other's voice but also to detect the tone of the words. Without such immediacy to the face of the other, one can hardly expect any genuine conversation to take place between individuals. You can never know when someone is being sarcastic, funny, not funny, serious or joking. At times it is difficult to tell what someone may mean by the particular words he or she is using. Levinas emphasizes: "The said in absorbing the saying

does not become its master [...], the trace of infinity in the subject is precisely a response to another, another that is witnessed but not thematized."³⁰

As evident in our epoch, technology has become an electric addiction for some - taking them out of the concrete world as they cling to the features the electronic/digital world offers. Technological addiction has, in fact, obsessed even students enrolled at the learning institutions: some of them keep themselves busy not with studies but with their mobiles. One can imagine how distracting internet and smartphone technology is to students' intellectual enterprises.

Definitely, conversations through social media have taken the place of traditional interactions and discussions. As a result of technology a person does not even need to leave the house to communicate and meet with others. Hence, she actually separates herself from the concrete person before her and gets 'buried' in a computerized person in her handset. For boys and girls, for men and for women, such "cocooning" is already trapping a person into a form of isolation that becomes more and more all-encompassing. The person finds himself or herself alone in a crowded environment.

Self-obsessed behaviour (for example in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and all forms of pornography) can be likened to certain behaviours that characterize the person who suffers a narcissistic personality disorder. This means that the person may be showing such symptoms as an extreme feeling of self-importance, a sense of entitlement, a need to be admired, a feeling of envy towards others, the expectation that others should be envious of him, a lack of empathy, readiness to exploit others to achieve his aims, and an uncontrollable propensity to get angry and vengeful if he feels obstructed or ridiculed.

Family members who wish to spend more time with their dear ones cannot do so because their dear ones are involved in the excessive use of gadgets. The family atmosphere becomes one of depression and loneliness. Sadly this is the situation of today's

³⁰ E. LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 148.

generation: though family members are living under the same roof, they are a thousand miles apart.³¹

Unless you see the person, you have no idea of the context surrounding the written words. In fact, personal and concrete encounters can obviate or reduce to a minimum misunderstandings, miscommunications, and assumptions that otherwise might have an adverse impact on how we view others. As we can witness in our contemporary time, many of us are preoccupied by the modern gargets, so we have limited concern even for our very immediate neighbours. Very often today everyone in the family is busy with his or her gargets – phones, personal computers, and the like – so that they do not really experience the personal encounters that become the focus of concentration for Levinas.

4.3 On Honesty

According to Levinas, honesty is an important element in the encounter with the Other. The human other, as Levinas presents, is always destitute and weak. It is because of the deprived face of the stranger that I need to be honest in my words and deeds towards her. In fact, honesty promotes peace and health of mind not only for the self but also for the interlocutor. It creates a situation of trust between the interlocutors, and thus eliminates deceptions, corruption and fear.

If there is honesty, there is no need for anxiety and reservation in my relationship with the other person. Surely, conversation built on lies and anxiety is less intimate and less pleasant than truthful exchanges. Deceptions create internal mental conflicts between what one knows to be true and what one says. But honesty promotes feelings of tranquillity and a sense of love; hence, honesty brings forth relationships that are more fulfilling and meaningful between the interlocutors.

If one is not honest, obviously, there is no meaningful encounter and hence no authenticity. For that reason, in my relationship with other people I need to be faithful to the truth to cherish

³¹ G. VEGA, “Isolation and Technology”: the Human Disconnect”, in *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 13/5 (2000) 468-481.

Also Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/243459547_Isolation_and_technology_The_human_disconnect [accessed 20 Nov 2018].

a relationship that grows according to the parameters of truth and goodness. Similarly, as an individual, I need to accept the responsibility that the others require of me; in undertaking my responsibility I should not expect any reward from them.

Shockingly, based on our day-to-day ordinary experiences we might say that in our contemporary Africa the value of honesty is almost gone. In the primitive African society, people had confidence in their fellow; there was little fear of the other. Nowadays, you can hardly leave your door open because of the fear that another may intrude into your house in your absence. We are living in a world where everyone is a suspect, whether he or she is from one's own family or is simply someone else who lives in the same social milieu. In our time, it has become normal for people to fear each other rather than to fear wild animals.

The human person has become a very dangerous animal, not to be trusted even in very minor things. In towns, for instance, the situation is rather bad: moving around in an environment crowded with people, one will always be on guard to make sure her belongings are safe. You can hardly leave your bags even for a minute without the fear that something may be stolen. That is the situation in most places in Africa from rural to urban centres. It is about such circumstances that Levinas' ethics challenges our dispositions as human beings, since we seem to be acting not like human beings but more like wild beasts.

4.4 On the Increasing Preoccupation with Material Possessions

A craving for material possessions that goes beyond what are basic needs is another unethical attitude that seems to be mushrooming in Africa today. In the traditional setup, most Africans used to share things with each other; hence the gap between the haves and the have-nots may have existed but was not as glaring as it is today. In our time, the discrepancy is rapidly increasing. Many of us now concentrate on our personal issues and exercise very little or no concern for the other. We tend to amass wealth more and more, yet our neighbour is suffering.

This is in fact contrary to Levinas' conviction of how we ought to behave in order to live authentic lives as human beings. In order

for us Africans to attain collective and progressive development, embracing Levinas' ethics becomes important for us in our desire to anchor ourselves in God's plans for Africa. So, in the struggle for one's progress, one should always leave room for one's neighbour. We should realize that human instinct is never content if it is given the opportunity to govern one's reason and will.

Your neighbour is dying of hunger while you are throwing away food. Does that make sense? For the betterment of the present and future Africa, Levinas' ethics should help us challenge the unethical attitude stimulates the desire for possession and the contraceptive culture that has reduced the neighbour to an object of momentary sexual interest and pleasure and has dominated our epoch.

4.5 On Hospitality and Sharing

Levinas emphasizes that individuals affirm their authenticity through welcoming their neighbours into their homes, under their protection. In welcoming the neighbour, the person should completely open himself or herself wholeheartedly without holding back. Thus, hospitality demands a sacrifice of going beyond one's egocentric borders and embracing the unique stranger in his or her alterity. That is to say, in order to lead an authentic human life I am obliged to offer an unconditional response to the stranger in her otherness. If I try to question or condition my openness to the stranger who needs my attention and service, then I would have entered a process of reducing her and totalizing her and her appeal into my horizon.

According to Levinas, hospitality knows no limits, no category of whom to help; hospitality is for anyone and everyone. In other words, I am commanded to welcome all mankind – beyond the borders of nationality, race, culture or ethnicity. However, perhaps Levinas' position can be questioned: how would I welcome the rapists, sexual abusers, thieves, drug dealers, the assassins, or other people known to sin gravely and lead others into grave sin? Levinas seems to be optimistic on this matter. Indeed, in African societies, there was always the share, for instance, a morsel of food, for the unknown guest.

In order to give emphasis to the African sense of sharing, in my tribe 'Iraq'w' there is a saying "mangu tsui ti alen", literally translated as "let's share what we have no matter how little it is". This imperative marks a true criterion of humanness as the basis of one's hospitality. To close the door of my home against my neighbour, to refuse the face who faces me is already thermatization.

In most cases we tend to be selective, we welcome only those known to us, or at least will have some impact on our life, and sideline the 'less important one'. At times, some can even change the time of dinner because of the unexpected advent of a guest. As we have articulated earlier, for Levinas, no one is exempted from such an exercise of one's humanity. No one is exempted from love, care, and respect.

For Levinas, a simple act of greeting is a manifestation of hospitality that I can offer to the Other. For that reason, by hospitality we do not limit ourselves only to the material services. Our good intentions for the other person also signify our attitude of generosity towards him. Hence, owing to its significance in upholding authentic relationships, hospitality is another notion to be appreciated from Levinas' ethical philosophy. As Africans, we need to go back to our roots, and invigorate our thinking and attitudes towards the other.

4.6 On the Use of Language

As it is semantically understood, language is a means of conveying my thoughts, sentiments, convictions, intentions and objectives to my interlocutor. But for Levinas, language understood in that sense equates to thermatization "the *Said*". His reason is that, language, understood as the communication of my ideas, feelings, convictions, purposes and objectives draws all meaning from within the speaker, and assigns them, imposes them, or offers them to the other person, the listener. As such, language is not lived but *said*, it becomes a means of categorizing *this* as *that*. In the *said*, the stranger is not involved, he is just passively 'there' as an object to receive meanings and orders from the speaker.

If language is reduced to the “Said”, therefore, language eliminates or reduces the *Other*’s place during the discussion, the moment of encounter. In fact, there is no conversation effected in the *said*.³² If language exists for the sake or the need of the speaker only, then the other individual is reduced to the level of an object simply to satisfy the speaker’s intention. So, language as the *Said*, thematizes. Levinas’ assertion about language does not rule out the deaf and the dumb, because for him language begins as a sheer encounter, it begins even before anything/any word is said. Levinas affirms, “face and discourse are tied together. The face speaks: it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse.”³³ Hence, Levinas’ position includes the language of signs.

However, for Levinas, language has an ethical character; it cannot be reduced to the level of a mere instrument for transmitting information. Language should not be understood as the means of informing others about what I have in mind, or what I need to express to them, with the supposition that once I have expressed what is on my mind, the encounter is over. Language should not be understood as the simple exercise of addressing a message like the fabricated object one puts in a mailbox. Rather, language should go beyond the *Said*, it should give room for conversation as I interact with others.

Levinas opines, “The essence of language is the relation with the *Other*.”³⁴ This mode of understanding language Levinas describes as the *Saying*. Ethically speaking, language is not for the sake of the *self* but originates with a vector towards the stranger and at the service of this *Other*. In fact, without the other, there would be need of language. Adrian Peperzak observes: “Language is the exposure through which the centre is transferred from me to the *Other*. The speaking subject is no longer by and for himself; he is for the *Other*.”³⁵

³² A.E. WILDE, *Levinas: Subjectivity, Affectivity and Desire*, Available at <https://hydra.hull.ac.uk/assets/hull:8617a/content> [accessed 25 Feb 2018], 182-183.

³³ E. LEVINAS, *Ethics and Infinity*, 87.

³⁴ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 207, 227.

³⁵ A. PEPERZAK, *Elements of Ethics*, 221.

Nevertheless, this is not always the case. Taking into consideration our Africa of today, our language tends to dominate and undermine the presence of the other. Levinas cautions us that in a discourse an individual should take a passive position, as he awaits to hear and discover the summons from the *Other*. So, the *Other* becomes his master, his lord. That is what Levinas means by an asymmetrical encounter.

We may ask ourselves, how do we exercise language in our daily existence? Perhaps on many occasions when we meet others, we struggle to convince them, make them spectators and listeners to our words; hence, we hold them in our world. If I realize that they cannot be contained or conquered then, then I avoid them, because of my struggle to exult myself before the *Other*. Thus, language as *Said* consolidates the self into his horizon of being, a totalizing sovereignty. But language perceived as *Saying* upholds the individuality of the interlocutors. It does not break their proximity but strengthens it. Through discourse the *I* bears witness to the *Other*. A. Lingis attests that "communication does not abolish the distance. In a word of greeting, with which another addresses me and draws me near, she or he sets before me his or her otherness."³⁶ Again, Michele Saracino observes that, in Levinas,

The dialogue that ensues between subject and *Other* transcends the privacy of their worlds and becomes a public declaration of their difference, even in the midst of their relation. This public declaration constructs a relationship that is not based on sameness, but rooted in difference. Language, Levinas suggests, highlights or bears witness to that difference. And it is the obligation of the subject to bear witness to the *Other* through languages.³⁷

That implies, in a face-to-face with the *Other*, that discourse alerts me to my egocentric orientation so much that *I* move beyond it to respect the *Other* as a unique being who is different from me. I allow or let him express, reveal his being, his world to me. Language as *saying* maintains our distance as distinct and separate

³⁶ A. LINGIS, *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility*, 67.

³⁷ M. SARACINO, *On Being Human*, 108.

free individuals. Language as “saying” recognizes and maintains the alterity of other people.

We may ask ourselves, how is our orientation regarding language towards others? Is my language a *said*, or a *saying*? In other words, am I trying to minimize my fellow human being by not allowing her to express herself during the moment of encounter? To put it differently, do I allow my colleague, my interlocutor to participate in discourse whenever I come across her? Thus, if we consider Levinas’ notion of language as *saying*, it will be of great help in strengthening our relationships with other people in the Africa of today.

4.7 Non-Reciprocity and Care: Love

In an ordinary social matrix, the giving of rewards to another in return for a gain for oneself is a defining feature of our conventional social exchanges. Commonly, most of us expect a gain or service in return for what we have given to our neighbour or for what we have done as a service to our neighbour. In other words, we seem to belong to the materialist school of suspicion whereby a person’s overriding motive for action is to gain something. In tandem with our adherence to the materialist school of suspicion, we normally tend to give only the excess or the superfluous or what we do not like or need any more.

However, Levinas challenges this trend of behaviour. For Levinas, giving only what is left over or the undesirable is in no way a genuine response. Giving is to be understood in accord with responsibility: an individual has to sacrifice himself, to deny himself of something that is very essential for himself and his existence. Hence, it is then and only then that I am capable of giving to the other person without any expectation of return the bread out of my own mouth, the coat off my own shoulder. Only when I am making this kind of sacrifice am I truly responsible for the other person in a strict sense.

In other words, in Levinasian belief, giving is not only offering something – what I like or possess – and it is not only choosing to give to the person I love, but rather it is a sacrificing of what I must have for my own existence, to whomever is in need. It is precisely

by this particular mindset of giving that my existence attains a new dimension, an authentic meaning.³⁸

Levinas' assertion against giving in view of return is based on the fact that, reciprocity would tend to reduce the *Other* to my own experience of him, of recognizing the other as co-present and equal. So, reciprocity not only corrupts the possibility of communication and revelation, but also corrodes the structure of one's responsibilities towards the *Other*. According to Levinas, our responsibility does not arise from our decisions or choices because, contemplation always arrives too late. Yet the subject is accused of things it did not do. Levinas insists that, the *Other* is irreducible to my experience of him and so never presents or co-presents with me; he is always one step beyond, one moment in the future:

Alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship, that is, as contrasting strongly with contemporaneousness. The *Other* as *Other* is not only an alter ego: the *Other* is what I myself am not ... It can be said that intersubjective space is not symmetrical. The exteriority of the other is not simply due to the space that separates what remains identical through the concept, nor is it due to any difference the concept would manifest through spatial exteriority. The relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual.³⁹

Therefore, in giving *I* do not give someone in need in order to merit from the act of giving.⁴⁰ The other individual moves or affects me to the point of giving my *self* to him, to the point of being selfless. Giving understood as a total self-denial, is a product of the appeal from the *Other*. When giving is understood as responsibility for the stranger it becomes a sacrifice and never a show-off, a merit or a recognition. For that reason, a genuine sacrifice entails life itself; the giving up of one's own life for the sake of the other person. In fact, dying for the love of the other manifests our very intimacy and care for him. It is for that reason we recommend Levinas' understanding of endless service of the

³⁸ The editor notes that this was the disposition of St. Maximilian Kolbe when he chose to die from hunger at the hands of his Nazi captors in order to save the life of a man whom he did not know.

³⁹ E. LEVINAS, *Time and the Other*, 84.

⁴⁰ This is the accusation that Karl Marx and the materialist masters of suspicion hurl at the human heart. (Ed.)

other individual without reward as the basis of our affiliations and for the betterment of healthy human relationships among Africans.

4.8 Presence: Proximity and Availability

Proximity and availability are essential to Levinas' ontology of intersubjectivity. Proximity is the closeness that one feels in the presence of the *Other*. It is a relationship with a sense of immediacy, without the mediation of any principle or preconceived notion. Proximity is the concrete foundation of moral responsibility. It is one's actual and concrete presence before the stranger. Levinas intends to teach us about the importance of being near and ready to extend our helping hand towards the destitute.

For Levinas, I can vindicate myself as one who is just to my fellow human being by establishing proximity with him or her. However, there are such instances whereby one can be near to one another but not available. If I come across the *Other* but fail to face him, I have not in actual fact encountered him. We could say such is an empty meeting. Thus, proximity is only meaningful when it is accompanied by availability. Hence, in our daily interactions, concrete presence (proximity) should go hand in hand with our availability to help others for that is the only way we can attain authenticity.

4.9 Respect for Others

Alterity, as Levinas presents it, is the very singularity that each one of us enjoys and establishes us as irreplaceable, irreducible, and unrepeatable. It is that which defines us and differentiates us from each other. It is our very essence as persons.

Levinas' ethics underlines the centrality of respect for the *Other* since the other person is never my equal. Although in a face-to-face encounter, I enter into actual and immediate relationship with the *Other*, that intimacy and concrete encounter do not eliminate the distance or the difference that exists between us as subjects of a relationship. By maintaining the essential difference between the interlocutors, Levinas' ethics challenges what he believes to be the traditional metaphysics that, from his point of view, makes an attempt to reduce the *Other* into the Same and so endangers one's alterity.

For Levinas, such a philosophy of totalization does not respect the uniqueness of people. Again, in his declaration of the compassionate gesture towards the individual's alterity, Levinas concretizes and proclaims the culture of love and care between persons. Looking at the contemporary African situation, there are many scenarios that indicate loss of respect not only for the elders (as they were in the traditional culture) but even for each other. Our respect has become too hypothetical; I respect the other who has made some contribution to my life... but am I respecting the other for her own sake, for his own sake? Today it is very common for a child to get seated while the old one is standing simply because the child has paid the same bus fare. I think the Levinasian line of thought offers us a creative insight to help us counteract a deteriorating sense of respect for others.

4.10 Authenticity

Generally, Levinas' ethics is geared towards establishing realistic human living. His ultimate purpose is to help us lead an authentic human life where we accept and respect each other as persons with an interior spiritual life, i.e., an Alterity. To be authentic is to be genuine in one's thoughts and actions. It is to live one's originality to the fullest. This is actually what Levinas advocates and expects of us in order to live as human beings. Thus, authenticity should define one's being; it should be my *raison d'être* during the course of all my struggles, and in the entire gamut of my relationships with others. Otherwise, no matter how much I excel, all my efforts and determinations will be meaningless. If my thoughts and actions are not directed towards leading an authentic human life which is accomplished in recognizing my fellow human being in her or his uniqueness, my life will be worthless.

Conclusion

This paper has intended to examine the relevance of Emmanuel Levinas to some aspects of unethical behaviour in the Africa of today. We initiated our study from our contemporary African context where we experience a variety of unethical behaviours now more than ever. We have briefly explicated Emmanuel Levinas'

understanding of authentic human existence, by honing in on what he perceives to be the most important factors that contribute to ethically upright intersubjectivity and by articulating inferences that can be drawn from those factors. We confined our investigation to his understanding of what constitutes an ethical intersubjective relationship. We have seen that to authentically exist as a human being, one needs to establish relationships without imposing any sort of condition. We have affirmed that authentic human behaviour demands a denial of self-interest for the sake of the other person. That is the gist of Levinas' ontology of ethical intersubjectivity, which in fact challenges our style of behaviour in Africa today. It is my expectation that this essay will help us to wake up and change our attitudes towards others for the betterment of the poor, the needy and the destitute, for the spirit of togetherness in our families, for the increase of honesty and trust in social groups and for the ethical improvement of the entire social matrix in our Africa of today.

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