Recognizing the Other's Appeal: Levinas's Contribution to the Discourse on Multiculturalism

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ABSTRACT: This paper provides an account of Levinas's contribution to the discourse on multiculturalism. It argues that the recognition of what he calls as the ethical appeal of the other's face is the necessary starting point in discussions relating to the issue of cultural pluralism. Demands for the recognition of the dignity of each individual can no longer rely on a credible notion of subjectivity and freedom. An individual's worth is not to be grounded in the idea of autonomy but instead in the ethical signification revealed in the face. However, the Levinasian understanding of the other has been criticized as an abstraction. The paper defends Levinas's insight by arguing that there is a distinction between the other and the way she manifests herself and that there are different and concrete ways through which Levinas speaks of the other and the self.

KEYWORDS: Levinas, multiculturalism, recognition, face, difference, identity

Introduction

Albert Dondeyne (1963, 166) remarks that our contemporary world is characterized by a growing sense of historicity and solidarity primarily because "the world is becoming one" and that humankind is now faced "with the greatest task ever—the task of building an economic and social world in which there is *room* for *all*." Dondeyne highlights the inescapable character of our time and the formidable challenge that we face. While it is true that the world is coming together as more lines of communication and transaction become available—thanks to modern

technologies—we also find ourselves in societies that are increasingly characterized by difference and diversity. The existence of differences is not only a fact but a potential source of misunderstandings and conflicts. At the root and at stake in these conditions are those particularities that make us who we are, that is, our identities (Kymlicka 1995, 1-5).

Recent decades have seen a great deal of discussions about creating societies in which people of diverse cultural backgrounds, traditions, religious commitments, languages, and so on, can peacefully coexist. However, anyone who engages in such debates and discussions must be aware of how daunting the task is. At a time when supposedly nobody can claim access to a world of eternal ideas or values (cf. also Sartre 1965, 40-41), it appears that we are left with only particular conceptions of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The latter will come into play in our attempts to live in plural societies, in making decisions that have repercussions beyond the present, and in our efforts to become who we are among others. These others are, likewise, trying not only to maintain themselves in some decent manner of existence, but also to forge their own identities. In an age when grand metaphysical narratives have lost their credibility (Lyotard 1999, 34 and 37), how do we even begin to talk about the possibility of a truly just pluralistic societies?

What we aim to do in this paper is to explore the contribution of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to the discourse on multiculturalism. We will argue that in working toward such just pluralistic societies, a certain manner of "seeing" the other person, one that has recognized the latter's irreducibility and inviolability, is necessary. In other words, we will argue that envisioning and building a world where there is room for all require the basic recognition of what Levinas calls as the radical alterity of the other. The paper will proceed in four steps. Firstly, we will provide the context for our discussion by considering some of the concerns raised by the well-known essay "The Politics of Recognition" in which Charles Taylor speaks of how identity and recognition are linked. Secondly, we will discuss Levinas's accounts of the encounter with the other, underlining the ethical signification revealed by the other's face. Thirdly, we will try to see whether or not Levinas's understanding of the other can withstand the critique of Rudi Visker who

argues that Levinas's other is too abstract to be a real concrete other. Visker's criticism will be addressed by clarifying the difference between the other and the way the face reveals itself. Fourthly, we will close our essay with a short conclusion.

Recognition and Identity

In his essay "The Politics of Recognition," Taylor (1992) explains that identity is never formed in solitude but rather always and continuously in a "dialogical" way. Part of our definition of ourselves comes from our dealings with and even resistance to others. The fact that identity is formed dialogically implies that one is, in an important sense, dependent on others: Recognition received from others plays an essential role in identity-constitution, both on the individual and social levels. Just as children come to have an image of themselves through interactions with their parents and significant others, fully grown individuals and collectivities can come to understand themselves through the eyes of those with whom they interact. Taylor (1992, 32) explains that on the personal level: "We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression." Though ideally one should be able to eventually define oneself on one's own, one can never totally divorce oneself from the influence of others. Personal identity will always be expressed before and negotiated "through dialogue, partly overtly, partly internal, with others" (Taylor 1992, 34).

Such is the importance of recognition that the lack of it (nonrecognition) and the failure to see another's worth (misrecognition), which is often coupled with the imposition on individuals and groups of a demeaning picture of themselves, adversely affect both their self-esteem and the way they regard their convictions and culture. Take women, blacks, and the formerly colonized peoples who suffered from both nonrecognition and misrecognition as an example. They have imbibed pictures of themselves as inferior, evil, or uncivilized to the point that they themselves became instruments of their subjugation and exploitation. *Uncle Tom's cabin* (Stowe 1995), for instance,

gives us a glimpse of how black slaves became as cruel as their masters or came to regard themselves as wicked or good for nothing because of the way they were dealt with by their oppressors.

In a time when societies are becoming more multicultural along with an increasing awareness of the link between identity formation and recognition, there is also a strong demand both for the institutionalization of measures that will ensure the survival of distinct and often minority groups and for the recognition of the worth of their cultural creations, customs, languages, and so on (Kymlicka 1995). Taylor observes that beneath these demands lies a certain convergence of the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference. The former assumes equal dignity for all persons regardless of race, color, religion, and so on (and which would thus also advocate the difference-blind application of law), while the latter calls for the recognition of a people's particularities and their collective goal of survival. Taylor notes that the politics of difference has grown out of or is based on the idea of the equal dignity of all individuals, each of whom is seen as a rational agent capable of determining the course of her life or of forging her own unique identity. As such, the politics of equal dignity relies on a certain understanding of the human individual.

Here, Levinas's claims about freedom and the human individual take on great significance. What seems to be decisive in the conception of the human being as implied in the politics of equal dignity is the individual's freedom to exert effort inorder to realize a certain kind of fullness. Now along with his critique of autonomy as arbitrary and as being in need of justification, Levinas claims that the aims of free human action have been shown to be inconsistent with its consequences. The disastrous results of the actions of humankind in the horrible moments of the last century have cast doubt on the centrality and primacy of the human being understood as a self-grounding autonomous rational agent, that is, a subject legislating for itself or a will that wills its own will. While this is not to say that we are not free or that freedom should be undermined, what has to be asked, Levinas claims, is whether or not autonomy really ensures the individual's dignity and makes her worthy of respect. Is there

not something else about the human person apart from and beyond autonomy that compels one to respect her, to acknowledge her worth?

The Appeal of the Other's Face

In *Totality and infinity*, Levinas (1999, 134) describes the emergent ego as having the tendency to be narrowly self-concerned—"entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate—without ears, like a hungry stomach." It struggles to achieve separation, autonomy, and sovereignty in a milieu full of non-Is, that is, things and "fruits of the earth" that can be exploited and enjoyed. This characterization is reflected in our ordinary lives where the effort to realize ourselves as persons leads us to achieve a level of self-sufficiency that possibly becomes oblivious to others. Indeed, this is what the Heideggerian understanding of *Dasein* partly means for Levinas: The human being is the being for whom her own being is an issue (Heidegger 1996, 10). She tends to persevere in and care only for her own existence. It may be objected that this is not true in all instances. We also pursue not only our own fulfillment and happiness but also that of those who belong to our circle of family and close friends. Nevertheless, this is still problematic. Our family and close friends are, in a sense, not totally other insofar as they are still treated as part of the home or the economy that we have established around ourselves. We take care of them partly because they are *like us,* or perhaps because *like them* we are bound to a certain context, history, bloodline, or some common interests.

Moreover, in daily life we normally approach other people obliquely, that is, through our social roles. We come across individuals with whom we "do business." We deal with bus drivers, librarians, students, waiters, vendors, among other individuals. It can even come to a point where we no longer see persons beyond their function or role, where we tend to reduce them to physical appearance, skin color, race, and so on. The other then becomes either a useful element in the fulfillment of our needs and desires, or a challenging obstacle that we try to overcome. Reduction to the same,

exploitation, manipulation are the things we do to relative non-Is that yield to our grasping hand and intellect with little resistance and nearly without complaint. But, as Levinas (1987, 50) points out, are other persons "given to us" in the same way that things are?

By describing how another approaches or "appears" to the I, Levinas shows how and why other human persons are radically different from the things that we can assimilate or reduce to ourselves. He speaks of the confrontation with the "face" of the other, an event that is more than a perceptual experience since, as Levinas himself clarifies, "face" here does not mean only and primarily the physical countenance. In a short confessional essay, Levinas (1997, 8) makes it clear (though still in a rather ontological language) that the face is not only a piece of flesh:

> The face is not the mere assemblage of a nose, a forehead, eyes, etc.; it is all that, of course, but takes on the meaning of a face through the new dimension it opens up in the perception of a being....The face is an irreducible mode in which being can present itself in its identity.

The face of the other is the way by which another person "shows" or reveals herself as such. By the term "face," Levinas wants to convey precisely that which is invisible, not only partly or temporarily, but radically and absolutely. While he speaks of the "epiphany" of the face, the other, strictly speaking, "cannot be seen" and gives herself only as one who essentially withdraws (Levinas 1987, 28). Though we may be standing close to an individual whose body is clearly present and visible, the other as such is "elsewhere," remains elusive, invisible, an ungraspable mystery, in short—an enigma (Levinas 1996, 70). The other as other remains invisible, and thus is not like other phenomena that are captured by our concepts and descriptions. Moreover, the face appears in its nakedness. This does not mean that we see a physical face devoid of make-up or that is unadorned by a mask, but that we are before this particular other person whose vulnerability and weakness are revealed to me. In being confronted by the face, another person is revealed beyond her physical countenance, the color of her eyes and skin, her context. The other appeals to us not to reduce her to any of these features.

The epiphany of the face of the other is a moral experience. In the effort to realize itself, secure and prolong its enjoyment, maintain its identity with itself, the I is like a force on the go that may be victimizing those others on its path. But the questioning face of the other halts our force and violence. In the face-to-face encounter, we are confronted by another person who resists reduction to a concept and/or to an object of use and enjoyment, to her function, physical traits and characteristics, history, race, among other things. The face of the other eludes our grasp and gaze, speaks and issues the command "Thou shall not kill" (Levinas 1999, 216). This prohibition does not at all prevent us from inflicting violence upon and/or murdering the other, since we remain the same and autonomous while we face the resistance of what really has no resistance, the other who we can still easily crush. While the face of the other commands, it can only beg or make an appeal. The face-to-face situation is morally charged because we are there presented with the choice of either recognizing and responding to this appeal or of turning our back on the vulnerable other, pretending that we did not hear her call.

The face of each human person we encounter seeks the recognition of her alterity, transcendence, and irreducibility, regardless of that individual's skin color, gender, religion, and so on, and regardless of what this particular other in this situation actually wants or says. This respect for alterity demanded by the other can be seen to be required by the recognition of the dignity of each human individual, which, as we have seen above in our consideration of Taylor, is at the base of the demand for the recognition of particularities and the worth of a minority or ethnic group's cultural productions. The way the other manifests herself, the fact that she reveals herself on her own, and that she addresses us prompts us to recognize an elusive "reality" that we cannot just reduce to ourselves. Before the face, we are made to realize the non-primacy of the I and the other's "infinity." It is this radical alterity and irreducibility of the other that must be recognized even before we come to a discussion of equal rights and the particularities and cultural products that we want to be acknowledged and sustained. It is not that the latter are not worthy of consideration, but that we come to a proper understanding of them and their basis in light of the more fundamental demand of the face. This

recognition of the other is a precondition of genuine communication, that is, of both the dialogues that involve individuals whose culture, convictions, or religious covenant we do not share, and the discussions and debates about the rights and demands of various groups.

The crucial point here is the way the other is seen. As Levinas (1972, 30) reminds us, all cultural productions presuppose the other, not only as "collaborator and neighbor of our cultural work of expression or client of our artistic production, but interlocutor: The one to whom expression expresses, for whom celebration celebrates, he who is both the term of an orientation and first signification." Levinas's main message here is that the point of departure of considerations regarding others and their cultures is the other herself being an interlocutor, as someone who comes to presence in a manner that tells us to respect her. In this connection, Wanda Deifelt points out that actual communication already presupposes the fact that the other has announced herself, that we have already been confronted by the other. She writes: "For Levinas, dialogue begins with the ethical interruption of the other: [T]here is no self outside the response to otherness, to the claims posed by the other" (Deifelt 2007, 117). She goes on to endorse an intercultural ethics the starting point of which is an awareness of and sensitivity to otherness, "an ethics attentive to difference, open to dialogue, and willing to learn from others" (Deifelt 2007, 118). Such an ethics begins with the humble admission that the other is beyond our complete grasp and thus with the awareness of our owing the other respect.

The same insight, the same starting point is vital in envisioning and discussing just and peaceful multicultural societies. We cannot justifiably claim that Levinas's basic point can be employed to solve all issues linked to multiculturalism, but that it should come into play in our relations with others and in discussions of the politics of recognition. Note that Levinas brings his insights about the I's non-centrality and the other's infinity to the social level. He recognizes the fact that there is always the "third party" or the third face that in turn questions our relation with an other and thus prevents it from degenerating into a selfish private affair. Given the presence of innumerable others who also appeal to us, we have to move on to reflections on the level

of justice. The presence of other faces that likewise demand our recognition ushers in the need for synchronizing consciousness, theory, science, order, prioritization, rational planning, government, institutions, and so on. All of these are to be grounded in the encounter with the face and they will always be subject to the face's critique. It is on this level that the consideration of the demands of diverse groups would most properly occur.

An Other too Abstract?

Though Levinas's account of the other has been recognized as contributing to discussions and theorizations of our relations with others in this time of culturally diversified societies, its suitableness for dealing with issues of multiculturalism has been called into question. There are commentators who think that despite Levinas's emphasis on the other, on ethics, and on the respect that the face demands, his insights cannot be employed in approaching issues relating to multiculturalism and the idea of just pluralistic societies. Rudi Visker is one of them.

At the outset, it must be mentioned that Visker criticizes the grounds of Levinasian thought. Visker believes, for example, that Levinas's ethics ultimately relies on a metaphysics that necessitates the use of words like "God" and "creation." While Levinas describes the encounter with the other as an ethical disturbance that provokes shame on the part of the subject, Visker (2000, 268) argues that in this very confrontation "another scene breaks through," which is *creatio ex nihilo*. Visker observes that the condition of the possibility of the ethical encounter with the other, meaning what enables us to hear the appeal of the face, is what seems to be a prior and more original relation with God. He writes: "At the bottom of the ethical relation, presupposed by it and enacted through it, shines the shy light of creation" (Visker 2000, 11). Visker (2000, 270) declares too that "[c]reation is thus for Levinas the first moment of the trauma." He does not think that Levinas's ethics can be divorced from the kind of metaphysics in which it is grounded, and thus also from what appears to be a religious vocabulary employed in Levinas's philosophical writings. Visker (2000, 12) argues that

uprooting the ethics of Levinas from such moorings "will inevitably reduce Levinas's philosophy to the caricature that unfortunately still circulates: [E]normous claims, and at best endearing moralism, but floating in thin air." One then can accept such an ethics along with its presuppositions. If one cannot pay such a price, Visker (2000, 11-12) tells us: "[O]ne should perhaps wonder whether what one wants is really this kind of ethics. And one could, then, perhaps start to question some of its premises." But, more than this opposition to the grounds of Levinas's thought, Visker criticizes the latter's view of the face of the other.

In speaking of the current trend in contemporary philosophy to give pride of place to the other and the relation that binds us to her, Visker says that the notions we are employing, particularly those of the self and the other, need to be rethought. He contends that the Levinasian other who reveals herself in the face is too abstract to be a "truly other Other, that is, an other who is a stranger to me because he is the bearer of *a strangeness beyond the scope of my sensitivity*" (Visker 2006, 12; italics mine). For Visker, each individual is attached to an inner core that is constituted by one's culture and history and which determines one as a person. An other here and now would presumably want to be recognized as an individual bearing particular physical and cultural traits. As Visker (1997, 161) remarks: "What the Other wants is for me to recognize him as a *singular* Other, not because of his characteristics (which he shares with others, thus making him 'replaceable'), but not detached from his characteristics either (for that too makes him 'replaceable')." He suggests that an awareness of our rivetedness to this strangeness or inner core and to all our visible and particular traits is awakened by the disturbing confrontation with the other who is likewise attached to and determined by such an internalized form or context. Visker makes a distinction between "understanding" the other and being moved by her appeal. It is highly possible that, owing to our attachment to our horizon or culture—and not merely because of an insensitivity grounded in a refusal to move out of ourselves, though we see how different the other and her culture are from us and our own context—we will not hear her appeal. Shame is not the only reaction that the other can elicit from us. We may be insensitive to the other's appeal, not because

of a selfish insensitivity or a narrow concern for ourselves, but because we do not really understand "where the other is coming from," that is, her context, values, culture, among others. For Visker, Levinas underestimates the fact that I and the other bear a culture and concrete particularities that, though not of our own choosing, determine us nevertheless. This emphasis on the recognition of the particularities and distinctiveness of the other is something that multicultural policies, for example, are based upon. In fact, what cultural groups are fighting for is equal recognition on the basis of their distinct identities.

While we welcome Visker's reminder of the rootedness of the other, we do not think Levinas can be accused of forgetting the other's concreteness and particularity. We agree with Visker that Levinas does say that the other's "face is abstract or naked" (1972, 31-32). It appears in its nudity and this nakedness is, according to Levinas (1972, 32) himself, "a stripping with no cultural ornament—an absolution." The face appears in an absolute way: It absolves itself from any and all determinations. Levinas (1972, 32) says further that "the signification of the face in its abstraction is, in the literal sense of the term, extraordinary, exterior to all order, to all world." The meaning of the face then exceeds or is outside of any form, history, or context. The preconceptions determined by these are put into question by the signification that we receive from the epiphany of the other.

Levinas insists on the description of the face as exceeding form because he has seen the dangers of attachment, rootedness, and reduction to form, history, or context. Levinas (1990, 232) points out that attachment to a ground, place, or context divides persons into "us" and "them," natives and strangers, those who are the same and those who are treated as outsiders because they are different. Only a certain "uprootedness" enables us "to perceive men outside the situation in which they are placed, and [to] let the human face shine in all its nudity" (Levinas 1990, 233). Elsewhere, Levinas (2003, 68-70) tells us that at the root of the atrocities of the Holocaust was Hitlerism, a kind of thinking that employed a reductive gaze that rivets the other to her body, blood, and race—a gaze that allowed and justified the murder of the other. What Levinas offers, and which could be of much use

in discussions of multiculturalism, is a view of the worth of each individual that avoids reductionism (since human dignity is not grounded in any supposition of a superior body or blood or race) and which is rooted in the primary experience of the face's demand for respect.

Visker (2004, 12) asks: "Is the Other really someone whose alterity does not follow from the characteristics which make him/her other? Could it not with more right be asserted that, instead of being 'signification without context', the Other is 'not without' context, 'not without' qualities?"

We do not disagree with Visker regarding the other's situatedness and her being the bearer of characteristics that set her apart from others. The other we encounter is always with qualities, comes from a certain background, and the encounter itself happens in a particular context. What we do disagree with is Visker's argument that when the face shines or signifies beyond context then it would mean that the other we meet is context-less. Following the logic of Levinas's insights, we argue that his point misses something. The fact that Levinas is fundamentally opposed to the *reduction* of the other to form, context, the body, and history already presupposes that he clearly understands that the individual assumes form, lives in a context, is attached to a body and part of history. When Levinas warns against limiting our regard of the other to some of her aspect or feature, then it somehow tells us that he recognizes the other's particularity. More importantly, a distinction has to be made between the situated other and the way this other shows herself to us. As Levinas puts it: "[T]he epiphany of the Other bears its own significance, independent of the signification received from the world. *The Other not only comes to us from a context* but signifies by itself without that mediation" (Levinas 1972, 31; italics mine). It is clear that Levinas does not deny that the other bears properties, culture, and is thus "in the world." What he does say is that the person *appears* as other, the face reveals beyond form or context, and that it is a revelation that indicates an ethical demand exceeding and/or preceding every particular and culturally determined claim. Now while there is a distinction between the situated other and the ways by which the other reveals herself, there is no disjunction between the self-giving and the self that gives of itself. The other is the concrete, situated other

who gives or shows herself in such a unique "absolute" manner. Regardless of her cultural background, skin color, religious beliefs, and so on, the look of this other facing us now tells us that we owe her respect.

In addition to the foregoing points, note too that Levinas speaks of the other as this particular human person addressing us; the other is "the stranger, the widow, and the orphan" who appeals for our response. In his later writings, Levinas speaks of the other as the neighbor, the first who has approached us, the near one. In *Otherwise than being* (Levinas 1981), he speaks of a primordial saying that precedes everything being said. This saying is understood as the pre-original approach of the other or the "proximity of the one to the other" (Levinas 1981, 5). Moreover, Levinas has always understood the human person as embodied. He speaks of the rivetedness of the I to being and thus to its body in *On escape* (Levinas 2003); the I's enjoyment and its achievement of separation in the mode of the body in *Totality and infinity*; and the subject's being in proximity with the other as exposedness and sensibility in *Otherwise than being* (Levinas 1981, 100; see also Rolland 2003, 29-31)).

More importantly, Levinas is clearly aware that the other is met as "somebody," as a particular embodied individual. If this were not the case, Levinas would not tell us to avoid focusing only on the physical features, the countenance the other bears, that is, on what one sees or perceives. Doing so risks being unable to meet the other as such: "You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes" (Levinas 1995, 86). Let us not forget that Levinas has likewise pointed out the necessary economic and thus material dimension of the response to the appeal of the face of the other. Neglect of this renders our attempt to assume responsibility empty at best and hypocritical at worst. It would perhaps be going too far to claim that for Levinas "our only attachments are those we have to the Other" (Visker 2004, 33). Such an assertion is certainly different from the claim that the relation with the other is a fundamental one. Being related to the other does not in any way suggest that the other here is devoid of context, body, and particular

distinguishing features. We have seen that for Levinas, the other is she who I encounter in concrete situations, an other who bears physical and psychic traits, a particular self-understanding and history, problems and sufferings—and yet manifests herself in a way that keeps us from reducing her to any one thing that she bears.

Conclusion

We saw in our discussion that there is a strong link between identity and recognition: Identity—personal or shared—is formed partly by the recognition received from others. The histories of women, blacks, the Jewish people and the formerly colonized evince that the lack of recognition or the imposition of a demeaning image upon an individual or group damages those who experience subjection, indifference, and neglect. Awareness of both the connection between identity and recognition and the dangers of non-recognition and misrecognition fuels the demand for the recognition of each one's rights and particularities. We tried, however, to bring attention to a more fundamental demand for recognition that underlies the exigency to acknowledge equal dignity and cultural differences. We turned to Levinas's account of the epiphany of the other's face, which signifies beyond form or context, questions our autonomy and totalizing existence, and commands and pleads that we recognize the other's alterity, invisibility and irreducibility. Then against Visker who alleges that Levinas's other is an abstraction, we clarified by saying that when the face manifests itself beyond form it does not mean that the other lacks context and individuation. While the other is embodied, in a context and in history, and is encountered in real and concrete situations, the face pierces through form as the other reveals herself. We also said that even prior to and/or apart from the other's expression of what she wants, the face appeals for recognition.

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