**Lévinas’s Ethics of Responsibility: limits within the concepts of Proximity and Plurality**

Looking at responsibility within a Lévinasian sense, human beings are firstly seen not in the philosophically traditional sense, of being egocentric, but rather seen as ethical subjects based on “the other” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989). The purpose of this paper is to examine the notion of responsibility as Lévinas conceptualized in the idea that human beings are responsible for not only themselves but for others. Lévinas within “Ethics as First Philosophy” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989) states that before all other forms of being in the world there must be responsibility to the Other (Lévinas & Hand, 1989). Lévinas defines this to mean that before freedom of the subject, and their subjectivity, before self-consciousness, before the consciousness of consciousness, before being, and before relativity there is “responsibility for the Other pre-exists any self-consciousness” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.75). Perhaps, Lévinas is saying that a human beings obligation comes before all of what follows from our being in this world, our obligation to the Other beginning with the “face to face” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.75), interaction, which is our first and foremost responsibility, the responsibility to the Other. And to be ethical beings who begin with responsibility we rely on the fundamental relationship of others. This notion of responsibility appears when we encounter, in the face-to-face interaction, the unknowable other. However, does this responsibility extend to more than two individuals and to those outside our immediate proximity? For example, Lévinas states that it is the “face to face” notion of seeing one in distress, yet what if it is a group of people, and what if they are not in close proximity but on the other side of the world? What if they are on the other side of a screen that can also be artificial intelligence in our modern era. Are we still responsible? And if we are responsible, how does Lévinas’s concept of responsibility fit into that situation or is it limited?

I want to examine responsibility in terms of proximity through a Lévinasian ethical lens and plurality, defined as more than two individuals, by questioning responsibility in terms of relationality, and vulnerability. I will be looking mainly at five authors Emmanuel Lévinas, Ernst Van Alphen, Judith Butler, Kevin Quashi, and Lisa Guenther, to answer the question of whether Lévinas’s definition of responsibility includes proximity, and plurality.

Levinas defines responsibility within “Ethics as First Philosophy” (1989) by calling into attention that responsibility as an ethical obligation of human beings arises prior to being self-conscious, reflective beings, (perhaps in this way it helps constitute us as such). Levinas states that:

Thought is an activity, where something is appropriated by a knowledge that is independent, of course of any finality exterior to it, an activity which is disinterested and self-sufficient and whose self-sufficiency, sovereignty, bonne conscience, and happy solitude are asserted by Aristotle (p.77)

Meaning that responsibility must come before knowledge and being, because knowledge is the possessive form of taking, “grasping”, and being a Heideggerian term for “Sens” is the knowing within self, thus, taking away its otherness, or as Lévinas states “freed of its otherness” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.76). This is because “being” becomes the property of knowledge freed from its alterity and uniqueness and mastered as property to do with as one pleases, allowing no connection to be built on curiosity with the unknown or mysterious.

Further the notion of contemplation with oneself again cannot come before responsibility and this is because contemplation or knowledge distorts “the whole of human lived experiences” and converts them into “accepted doctrines, teachings, and science” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.77). Lévinas states that Aristotle’s notion of the contemplative man sustained through wisdom and freedom is a contradictory concept of finite freedom (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.77 & 84), meaning that again, responsibility precedes freedom in that we are free because we are responsible for the other before anything else, we are not free voluntarily because there is no will before our responsibility to the other. Our will is the reduced consciousness of intentionality that finds consciousness in reflecting upon itself, as Lévinas states:

It rediscovers and master’s its own perception and science as objects in the world, thereby affirming itself as self-consciousness and absolute being- also remains a non-intentional consciousness of itself, as though it were a surplus somehow devoid of any wilful aim (p.77).

This form of unknowing knowledge using intentionality, consciousness, and ego “acts and wills and has intentions. Consciousness of consciousness”, (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.79) yet again it has no initiative and will, it is aimless and indirect “without any initiative that might refer back to an ego; passive like time passing me or aging me” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.79). Thus, intentionality reduces wisdom to an increased notion of self-consciousness, this is the notion of totalizing what is other than I, because self-consciousness affirms itself as an absolute being. For Lévinas, it is the “non-intentional” which cannot be controlled. Lévinas states that this non-intentionality is the *mauvaise conscience* the unhappy consciousness which exists without aim, “it is aimless and indirect” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.79) and because of its passivity for the unsettled, unknowingness of Other, it affirms its being by having to respond to one’s right to be (Lévinas & Hand, 1989).

However, responsibility is not in isolation as it requires relationality within the present, this is because the past is no more, and the future is not real, therefore, we need other people to get to the present. Lévinas states that a being’s rationality begins in the present and that “Knowledge is re-presentation, a return to presence, and nothing may remain other to it” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.77). Responsibility and relationality to the Other in the past cannot be reiterated, it is a memory, similar to Arendt’s notion of *The Institution of Promise* within “The Human Condition” (Arendt, 1998, p.243). Memory does not allow us to forget, meaning that memory has a history however, it is not history. Thus, responsibility and relationality to the past cannot introduce time to the “being” like the function of present does (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.80). The past is the existence of what may have been in comparison to what is the existing. Meaning that within the self-contemplation state, we are living in the present, reflecting on the present, thus it is the present that enable us to reflect and ask the question of “being”, to ask what it means for me to exist, and who am I? Which creates the distinction between the existence of past memories and existing present as something that was an in-dissolvable existence between and among beings, meaning the relationship between relationality and others Otherness, this form of questioning would not be possible. Therefore, we need the present, the space of contemplation in order to create that proximity to ask those questions.

Presence is ontologically temporal, of this world, earthy and corporeal (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.84), and “responsible for its very presence” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.80).

However, questioning and contemplation in the present requires relationality, as Lévinas states that this relationality stems from the being in a passive and non-intentional state “in the way it is spontaneous and precedes the formulation of any metaphysical ideas on the subject” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.82). This form of passivity and non-intentionality requires the questioning of being in the *mauvaise conscience*, a form of questioning which cannot originate from the “I” but is open to being questioned and questioning, “to have to respond” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.82). Meaning that one responds to the right to be and the other affirms their right to be by questioning, giving rise to the spontaneous acts of responsibility for others. “I” only become a subject when an-other calls me, there is no self without an-other who calls me into being. Similar, to Arendt’s concept of “action”, in that my action, my state of being is brought to recognition when another acknowledges my being (Arendt, 1998).

Being an “I” is radical passivity. To be an I is to suffer, to undergo and be subject to the Other, to be an I is to live for the Other for a time beyond my own time, and a world without me Lévinas & Hand, 1989). This is because, there is something that proceeds us, which we can master as object but cannot control. Before we are born the world has already been here, the world will continue to be here when I cease to exist. We are put into this world, and yet it is deprived of our subjectivity, of all subjectivity. What is left after everything is annihilated. There is something that our experience of ourselves and the world that gives us unease and lets us know that we are not the masters of this world. Responsibility is not what I choose to take on but the very foundation and precondition for selfhood (SFU Public Square, 2017).

Lévinas states that “Language is born in responsibility” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.82), perhaps signifying that, our words give meaning to who we are, our language is part of our identity, and demonstrates our values, ethics, and virtue in that our words are the projection of our actions to come. Yet Lévinas states that our face precedes language, as before we speak our actions, our expressions, “the nakedness and destitution of the expression” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.83), thus, the “defencelessness, vulnerability itself” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.83) is firstly made apparent. It is “our calling” to the face, to the Others vulnerability and the “guiltless responsibility”, a form of fundamental obligation to Other, a pre-being, as if to state that I am my brother’s keeper even before I am a reflective being[[1]](#footnote-1). This form of responsibility that begins before me is the “calling me into question, that recalls my responsibility” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.83). The Other, even though stranger, foreigner, or Other being that occupies the same space, or even an unwilled proximity from me, for example within the analogy of the elevator, within Ann Chinnery’s lecture “Render Responsible by the Fragile” (SFU Public Square, 2017) becomes my friend, my neighbour, someone I am before myself responsible for. The vulnerability and death of the Other a possibility of the end calls me into responsibility. Fear for the Other man’s death does not turn back into anguish for my death. My coming into recognition of mortality is coming of recognition, of fear for the Other persons death, perhaps this form of responsibility somehow leads to authentic existence.

Therefore, Lévinas believes that to be ethical beings we rely on the relationality of the Other, meaning that we cannot understand responsibility through our isolation with self. To be ethical beings we rely on the fundamental relationship to the Other, and this is defined by Lévinas as “the face of the Other being the original site of the sensible” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.82). Although Lévinas emphasises ethics to be first philosophy and responsibility as thought referring to the good rather than truth, I would suggest that there is a weakness in his utopic theory because it is extremely difficult to apply within the real world. This displays itself primarily in the fact that it is extremely difficult to tease out who exactly Lévinas is discussing when he writes about responsibility and the face-to-face interaction, as well, if distance plays a role in this interaction. How does proximity, and not being face to face change the pre-ontological responsibility to the Other? Is responsibility confined to the “I” and the Other? Can it be applied to more than one person? To a group of people? I will explore Lévinas’s concept of responsibility in terms of proximity within history and spatial distance, as well as plurality, in respect mainly to groups of people, minorities and racialized bodies.

Proximity is defined as the space between human beings. For example, in Ann Chinnery’s Lecture “Rendered Responsible by the Fragile” (SFU Public Square, 2017), Chinnery discusses the unwilled proximity, that forces a black man and a white women to be confined in an elevator. However, spaces where we dwell near, can break down those barriers as we have little space and thus must share. Through our modern era this notion of being stuck, unable to leave “being” together in a world that is constantly driving us to separate from each other via technology, forces us to be uncomfortable, and vulnerable.

Vulnerability is equally fundamental, as Lévinas states that it allows for alterity to exist in the unknowingness of the Other, the *mauvaise conscience* (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.82), as one is open to receiving what they may not know or have misconceptions of. The stereotype that is conjured in each person’s mind is then challenged, if both people are willing to get rid of the self within the ego and have “instead fear for the Other[s]” wellbeing. As the Others wellbeing is dependent on my wellbeing, since we live in proximity to one another and are social beings (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.85). This state of “non-intentional passivity” in allowing others Otherness, will not totalize the Other which is commonly seen when we pass ourselves off as the relations of the “Same to the Other” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.85), erasing the Others alterity for our own comfort. However, how does the concept of responsibility in relationality and vulnerability to the Others alterity change when they are not in close proximity to one another? Does this notion of responsibility have boundaries?

The concept of proximity within this paper is discussed in terms of distance both historically, and spatially. Historically, as seen within Ernst Van Alphen’s “Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought” (2005), is an illustration of how distance for example, can be used to normalize violence within history without the requirement for responsibility. The author uses artists to illustrate the atrocities of the Holocaust interpreted by artists into artwork, this is a form of “playing” with ideas that one is distant from. And though the intentionality behind these art works is to demonstrate the non-mastery of the Holocaust as something that should not be taught as facts but perhaps felt and experienced through the play of absurdities. However, it is a form of normalizing violence. One cannot even begin to fathom, the horrors, and yet to escape the boredom of learning history and dare I say the trivialization that may come with repetition within education, suffering and violence are made into “artwork”. A form of normalization due to proximity. I also believe it is a form of disrespect because of proximity due to time, in that it is within history and those that have not been exposed to the Holocaust firsthand, nor heard of it through the generation that experienced the atrocities who may be more inclined to play and transform the horrors of genocide into art. The author defines this mode of transforming as “an insufferable reality into something normal-something sufferable” (Alphen, 2005, p.184). Yet it is this very notion of making something insufferable, sufferable, that normalizes it, and subconsciously can excuse responsibility, as something within distance, space, and time. “Playing” with peoples most vulnerable memories happens with newer generations that are further apart from remembrance, thus, even one’s history becomes less personal. And though one can argue that to make play and art out of unquestionable horrors is a tribute to the memory of the Holocaust, this can commonly be so because of proximity, for how can one who has experienced the Holocaust play with its “artful” games? How would Lévinas’s theory of ethics address this historical proximity that requires responsibility for the Other’s alterity and independence? Yet a form of totalizing is also taken place when past memories grab the place of playing with toys, images, and art. Does this totalization of historical memory through art not take away the Otherness of the other in depicting certain images, and figurines that cannot capture what that Otherness within past memories of people are? Where does the relationality and obligation for Other position itself? Is it within the remembrance of the art? It is as if the artist has construed a form of empathy via the making of Holocaust toys for others to interact with. Not only normalizing but also taking on another form of “mastery” via art, which can be open to interpretation, yet it can also be totalizing as it is imaginative and not narrative. (Alphen, 2005). The closeness or distant memory of history is one form of proximity that is problematic in terms of Lévinas’s concept of responsibility to the Others alterity, yet there is another form of proximity which is equally problematic. This is proximity as distance spatially.

Proximity can also be seen as distance spatially, as is evident within Judith Butler’s article “Violence, Mourning, Politics” (2003), in which she discusses the limits of thinking the western world sets on the kinds of losses avowed as losses in war, and how some bodies are deemed as deserving to be mourned while others are confined to the mourning of their immediate proximity. There is an exclusion of not only plurality which I will discuss in the next section but also proximity, in that my distance from another, allows me to remain indifferent to the call of the Other. Perhaps as Gibbs has stated within his book “Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities” (2000), it is human beings’ inadequacies to listen. However, again proximity plays a vital role in how we deem the Other. The distance between myself and someone from the other side of the world releases my responsibility under Lévinas’s definition of responsibility in that I am not “face to face” with them and so I do not see their “extreme exposure, defenselessness, [nor] vulnerability” (Lévinas & Hand, 1989, p.83). In this sense how can I respond to the call? Does proximity versus the fragmentation of frames for example, as emphasized within Butler’s article on “Photography, War, Outrage” (2005) separate my value of humanness to someone else’s in a non-western country? Though one can also argue that the Otherness of, for example, people of Iraqi descent’s religion, traditions, and language further devalues their worthiness as human beings, because of the very notion that Lévinas states it should not. Their Otherness, the names and stereotypical notions of the West, places Iraqis “outside the ‘human’ as it has been neutralized in its “Western” mold” (Butler, 2003, p.21). Lévinas’s ethics of responsibility though exemplary, still requires a way of looking at proximity that binds responsibility globally, especially in a hierarchical structure, as those who are more powerful are responsible for those with less power, just like the notion of “the more vigorously I know myself, the greater my responsibility for others” (Gibbs, 2000, p.30). In that the Other’s call for my response is dependent on me, we cannot live without one another, as human beings we are dependent on each other regardless of proximity. The agriculture in Africa sustains people in Canada, whom I rely on and who rely on me. Or, just like Lévinas’s example of a baby as vulnerable and dependent on others for life, so too are those who are deemed as Other regardless of whether they are in or from foreign lands that Westerners cannot identify their sameness with, or of similar backgrounds.

However, it is noteworthy to state that the solution of proximity is not empathy, nor sympathy. Jill Carter within “Discarding Sympathy, Disrupting Catharsis: The Mortification of Indigenous Flesh as Survivance-Intervention” (2015), states the limits of both empath and sympathy in asserting that the first is to feel *with* and the latter to feel *for*, (p.415) both of which misconstrue the production of truth into a performativity (Carter, 2015). Resulting in the loss of the Other’s alterity as that which was once the genuine respect that governed nations (Carter, 2015), a form of responsibility to the Other’s alterity, now has become a unified society. In a Lévinasian sense empathy asks for the Others experiences to become a form of sameness as the “I” egotistically puts itself in the Others experiences, whatever is ethical between us- the “I” and the Other is not a matter of knowledge and “grasping” (Butler, 2003). I would even argue that empathy is not a proper grounds for morality. This is because empathy can lead to immoral action, it can prevent the rationalization of moral harm, thus, morality and empathy are completely independent of one another. Sympathy again is also not sufficient in that sympathizing is a form of resemblance to the Others otherness. My relationship is with the mystery, the Other’s alterity, the otherness within that being that I do not see within me. So how do we remain responsible to Others alterity when they are not in close proximity to us, without trying to totalize their otherness, and more fundamentally, giving them the same amount of respect and recognition as we do to our sameness? This is a fundamental problem within Lévinas’s work on responsibility as it does not take into consideration the certainty of proximity, which can be deemed as Eurocentric, in that it is mainly concerned with western ideals.

Furthermore, Lévinas’s ethics beginning with responsibility also does not extend to groups of people or a multitude of various ethnicities, races, cultures and so forth. For the sake of this paper, I define plurality in terms of groups of people including women, children, heterosexual as well as homosexual, racialized bodies, and for that matter all living beings on earth including sentient beings, and nature. Lévinas within his theory of ethics defines responsibility as relational to the Other, as a calling from the Other (Lévinas 1989), and yet who is this Other? And significantly, can it be more than two people, more than the “I” and the Other? Meaning, that it cannot be racialized bodies as they are not deemed singular and yet Lévinas’s theory of responsibility must be between two singular faces (Parker, 2021, p.228). Though Quashie within “The Sovereignty of Quiet” (Quashie, 2012) refutes this notion of singularity by stating that it is not an exterior but an interior state of being where no one can deny your singularity. Further stating that the interior, what dwells within is more important, as it excludes itself outward. Perhaps this is Quashie’s notion of existence in doing the work of existing, turning inward and becoming almost unique. However, it does not take away from the very notion of what Lévinas’s ethics primarily stands for, which is the responsibility for not totalizing the Other but remaining unsettled with the alterity of the others Otherness. And in that as subjects’ human beings take objects and make things identical, disappearing into the other. Where does racialized bodies, and genders stand within this singularity of self?

Furthermore, Guenther within “Dwelling in Carceral Space” (2018), discusses Lévinas’s insufficiency in addressing space, ownership, and hospitality as it is in historical conflict with the complexities “of racist spatial violence in the carceral state, [and] the collective transformation of meaning and materiality in radical social movements” (Guenther, 2018, p.79). In this sense, though Lévinas’s definition of responsibility does address the alterity of the others Otherness, through the calling of the Other, in that it recognizes it’s singularity. It simultaneously also excludes that which is not singular, for example groups of people, mass demonstrations and protests, minorities and racialized bodies, all of whom throughout history have not had the luxury of homogenous majority (Parker, 2021). Mostly because similar to the face as the first point of encounter, minorities, and racialized bodies are seen differently, their skin speaks before their face in objectifying and categorizing them, thus making it easier to deem them as less human, and fear of their Otherness is translated into violence that can be normalized as stated above within Ernst Van Alphen’s and Judith Butlers work, the normalization of violence because of their alterity due to proximity as distance in time historically, and space spatially.

There is a need of strangers, yet to surrender their identities, is a metaphysical violence when we reduce people to *all*. Lévinas within his utopic vision of responsibility could not theorize his ethics into practice.

Though Lévinas’s ethics of responsibility is not sufficient when it comes to proximity within history and spatiality, nor within the complexities of plurality, it is thought-provoking enough to help us understand what is at stake in such violence, especially in our modern technological and consumerist era where it is easier to conceal intentionality, and to provoke immorality as “cool”.

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1. A reflective being follows from responsibility associated with reason and being reflective. How can there be this guilt free responsibility even before we are beings? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)