Reinterpreting the meaning of Human in the Global Era following Levinas

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Abstract

It is high time to explore the meaning of being human in this globalized world. While exploring the meaning of being human or relearning to be human in global times, this paper will try to interpret how to sustain our cultural identities in this democratic, technologically overpowered world. In between the divinization of the human as the centre of the world and her rejection by anti-humanism lies a third paradigm, explored by Emmanuel Levinas. We can relearn our position of being human from a new perspective that allows us to keep our uniqueness in terms of culture and values as individuals and to protect our cultural identities.

Keywords: *Emmanuel Levinas; Anarchy of responsibility; Substitution "one-in-place-of" another; Critique of Sartre and Hegel*

Democracy and technology are the two central institutions of modernity and correspond closely to each other. The power over nature that technology bestows on each individual may be viewed in political terms. It is power within society that democracy allows us. Both democracy and technology place individual human beings at the centre of the world. It is a kind of a "humanist" attitude. From the aestheticization of art to the rise of high-speed trains, from the emergence of consumer society to the globalization of wars and totalitarianism, the reign of subjectivity plays the supreme role. In other words, it is the rise of humanism which is given the utmost importance.

As it is well known, humanism is a position that attributes to human beings absolute importance. Here, human being, as if, plays the role of god. On the other hand, anti-humanism holds that individual human beings are totally controlled by outside forces like economic and social, and they are essentially incapable of seeing themselves what they are. But in between these two extremes, there lies a third paradigm where it is possible to relearn the role of human beings from a new perspective. In this globalized world how to keep our uniqueness in terms of culture and values as individual? How to protect our cultural identities? Taking the clue from Levinas, it is possible to relearn our position as human.

Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most remarkable philosophers of 20th century philosophy, has unveiled the concept of the "Other" from a different aspect. To Levinas, "the crisis of humanism in our age" is not to be solved by the "anti-humanism that will reduce man to a medium". He raises the question of the subject from a new dimension. It is an enquiry that

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shows a kind of "rupture of immanence". Here, the emergence of an authentic subjectivity in being stands opposed to the metaphysical model of humanity in which, by endlessly reducing the Other to the Same, "man shuts himself up like a monad". Levinas, in his writing, brings a kind of intersubjectivity with 'the responsibility for the other' which opens the sphere of duty and ethics.

Levinas' concept of responsibility for the other emerges against the backdrop of a period that he describes as "millennia of fratricidal struggles, political or bloody, of imperialism, scorn and exploitation of human being..." (Levinas, 1995, 132) This background makes Levinas' ethics of responsibility somewhat different from the traditional ways of thinking. It was Husserl's phenomenological thought that influenced Levinas to form his view of the Other. Levinas is particularly interested in Husserl's notion of intentionality-which always shows the directedness of consciousness towards an "other". Here it must be mentioned that Husserl's concept of "other" is different from Levinas' concept. The intersubjective discourse is the main tune of Levinas' writing. To him, subjectivity is born out of its relations with others. "Being-for-the-other" defines who I am. According to Levinas, to be self "signifies then, not to be able to get out from under responsibility" (Levinas, 1966, 41).

The terms "responsibility" and the "other" are very much interrelated. To be responsible means to make oneself available for the service of the other in such a way that one's own life is intrinsically linked with the other's life. A kind of attitude is displayed here; that is, it opens an ethical dimension by connecting one with the other. The role of responsibility takes a complete different turn in Levinas' thought. It is a "place" where one binds the self to the other. But this binding happens when the self enters into a relationship that is disinterested but not indifferent to the other. "Desire" and "need" are the two terms which Levinas distinguishes in his writings. He describes need as "the return itself, the anxiety of me for myself, the original form of identification which we have called egoism" (Levinas 1966, 38-39). And desire according to Levinas, "proceeds from a being already full and independent" (Levinas, 1969, 254-255). Here desire for the Other is not an appetite but a generosity. The Subject aspires to the Other for the sake of the good of the Other. A kind of disinterestedness between the Subject and the Other is formed where the Subject is "like a being who opens a window which has been mirroring him" (Levinas,1966, 40). Levinas interprets desire as something that nourishes with a new hunger. The Subject always striving towards the Other in a movement that never ceases to stop as the desired does not satisfy the hunger. Here a point must be noted that Levinas' concept of responsibility is somehow concrete. He refers to it as "the duty to give to the Other even the bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's shoulders". It may be mentioned that Levinas is not suggesting giving away one's surplus bread and spare coat. One has to offer the very ones that one owes and depends upon.

Levinas offers a complete new interpretation of the notion of responsibility. To him, responsibility is pre-original, that is, it is a notion which inhabits in me through my ancestors. It originates from a time before my freedom and before my beginning. It is an absolute past that has no subject. This shows its inevitability as a kind of command, which makes it unique from the interpretation of modernity, where everything starts from subjectivity in terms of mastery and control. As responsibility is not originating from the Subject; so, the Subject cannot master it. Here, the notion of responsibility is not within the purview of the Subject's ethics, but the ethics of the Other. This implies that the Subject supports and is under the control to everyone. As the Subject lacks control to responsibility, Levinas names it as an-

arcy. At this juncture, Levinas distinguishes "anarchism" from "anarchy". The former is a process without direction. And the latter does not come under any principles. But though it is beyond principles, it is not of itself chaotic. The anarchy of responsibility is something constructive. Responsibility is anarchic as the Subject is commanded by what he or she cannot represent to Self. Therefore, responsibility is like an obligation prior to any commitment on the part of the Subject. To Levinas, it is like the sacrament of Orders where the newly appointed priest is ordered to serve the community entrusted to him/her, but at the same time given powers to exercise his/her ministry. "Disorder" and "order" both form part of the anarchy of responsibility. It is a "disorder" because it refuses synthesis before oneself. But it is an "order" as it creates a kind of new ethical relations between the Subject and the Other-relations where the Other is recognized as other.

There are different modes of being that Levinas introduced in his philosophy. One such mode is being-for-itself, in which the Self is pre-occupied with itself and so indifferent to the Other. But Levinas uses the term "being-for-the-Other" which later on he modified to "the-one-for-the-other" in order to escape the language of ontology and also to show a position in which the Self is responsible for the Other. To get away from traditional ontology, Levinas introduced the notion of "substitution". This notion is used in the context of responsibility. In fact, it is applied as a critique against Sartre and Hegel, for whom the self is posited as a for-itself. Levinas uses the notion of substitution as indispensable to understand subjectivity. It is a process through which the Subject empties itself of its being, so that it can accommodate the other. Substitution is re-phrased by Levinas as "one-in-the-place-of another". In substitution, the Other is not merely an object of representation, but it is putting oneself in the place of the Other. Here the Subject plays a protective role to the Other. Substitution involves persecution of the Subject because the Subject not only cares for the Other, but is answerable to his/her mistakes. Levinas' conception of responsibility makes the Subject to be even prepared to die for the Other.

Levinas (1998, 104) comments: "But I don't live in a world in which there is one single 'first comer', there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my fellow. Hence, it is important to me to know which of the two takes precedence". Here the third party points to the fact that the Subject and the Other cannot form a totality as the Subject has not only to deal with its neighbour (Other), but also with the "other" who exists besides the neighbour. The above view of Levinas perfectly explains the meaning of being human in this globalized era, Following Levinas we may say that "the 'I' is in relationship with a human totality" but not a totality of a unity. The inter-subjective discourse of Levinas contributes more towards human solidarity, cooperation, and dialogue in this global world.

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