The Need for a Self in Levinas’ Ethics:

Why ‘the Other’ Does Not Quite Make the Cut

This paper sets out to examine the notion of the ‘Other’ present in the Emmanuel Levinas’ *Time and the Other* and argues that, as presented, the ethics argued for by Levinas’ is incomplete and requires a conception of the ‘Self’ in order to carry normative weight. The paper begins by turning to the Levinasian conception of time. The paper then moves to flesh out an understanding of alterity and the ‘Other’ in Levinas’ ethics. It concludes by moving to provide a conception of the ‘Self’ that can function in conjunction with the ‘Other’ in a manner that adequately provides normative force for ethical action.

I received my B.A. in Philosophy with a specialization in Ethics Magna Cum Laude from Creighton University. Currently I am pursuing a Masters of Arts in Philosophy of Religion and Ethics from Biola University’s Talbot School of Theology with plans on pursuing a Doctorate in Philosophy upon completion of my Masters degree.
Ethical responsibility, morality, and normativity have all seen a great deal of philosophical reinterpretation since the enlightenment era. The work done by Kant in his Metaphysics stood as the preeminent work in ethical theory for nearly two decades. It was a work that demanded philosophers approach it and discuss it if they were to make any serious attempt at an understanding of ethics. However, no longer does Kant stand alone in demanding that philosophers engage with his work. The ethics put forth by Emmanuel Levinas has risen to demand such an engagement as well. This paper will discuss the ethics argued for by Levinas and argue that the attention paid solely to the ‘Other’ leaves his theory incomplete, requiring a conception of the self to truly be effective.

An understanding of Levinas’s ethics requires that one begin by looking at his conception of time. Time has traditionally been understood, argues Levinas, as “a formal time ‘line,’ spreading out into infinite ‘befores’ and infinite ‘afters’ [that are] conceived first, and instants [that] are afterwards placed within it, as its context, each instant being the same as all the others, and each excluding all the others.” However, this conception of time does not give full credit to the concreteness of the instant, argues Levinas. Each instant is a concrete conformation and validation of the “accomplishment of existence.” The instant is thus the “subject’s escape from anonymous existence” for it locates the subject in the scheme of time. For this reason, the instant plays a crucial role in the establishment of time in Levinas’s thought.

From his consideration of the material instant, Levinas moves on to reach the conclusion that if “time is not the illusion of movement…then the absolute alterity of another instant cannot be found in the subject, who is definitely himself. This alterity comes to [one] only from the other.” Time is thus linked necessarily to the relationship one has with the Other. However, it is not a private relationship that can be maintained solely by the self. It is a relationship that is
ecstatically projects the subject into the world and does not allow the self to remain hidden. The means by which the self gets projected into the world and is placed in contrast to the Other is ‘Time’. Levinas then moves to argue that the

...classical conception [of time] cannot account for the ‘fact’...that the other person encountered face-to-face is not the subjects contemporary, that they do not meet one another ‘at the same time.’ The time of the Other and my time, or the times of mineness, ecstatic temporalities, do not occur at the same time.5

By irreducibly linking the self to the necessary alterity of the Other in time, Levinas has built a foundation for his ethics. For, time “means that the other is forever beyond me, irreducible to the synchrony of the same.”6 Thus, one is “obligated to ask who the other is, to try to objectively define the undefinable, to compare the incomparable, in an effort to juridically hold different positions together.” It is here that one finds the beginnings of Levinas’s ethics.

Alterity, as has been discussed above, is the foundation for Levinasian ethics for it “must be acknowledged in terms of what surpasses understanding absolutely...what exceeds or precedes the beginning of philosophy: the surplus or excellence of ethical command and the infinite responsibilities it calls forth.”7 It is in this interaction between the alterity of the Other and the familiarity of the self that the heart of ethics rests. It is through interaction with the Other that one can establish a conception of the self, or the ‘I’. Richard Cohen, writing on Levinas’s ethics, states that the

I commanded by the Other finds itself commanded before itself, despite-itself, before its own self-control, before the very abilities which seem to be its definition and definitiveness. The I elected to its responsibilities is elected subject to the Other. It is
forced into itself, morally singularized, made responsible, not by itself but despite-

itself…by the Other.\(^8\)

Accordingly, responsibility to the Other, and its needs, is inescapable “not because of any rights, but simply because the Other exists. This very existence makes us morally responsible, a responsibility which is limitless and undeniable.”\(^9\)

However, recognition of the existence of the Other is a difficult undertaking. For if, as Levinas’s understanding of time and the Other has it, the other and the I never interact “at the same time”, one is forced to an interaction with a radical alterity that is “beyond all the syntheses which have hitherto defined time”\(^10\) One can almost be said to be interacting with a future other “who is always yet to come…who will never and can never fully present himself, because the subject’s ego cannot reach in or reach out to be or anticipate the Other’s ego.”\(^11\)

Of the coming Other Cohen writes, “The coming character of the Other…is not merely unforeseeable,…it is not merely a question of craft and ruse…rather the other is better than the ego, and thus exerts moral demands on the ego.”\(^12\) The Other is, necessarily of better character than the self and thus demands of the self ethical responsibility to the Other. Wes Avram, in his paper “On the Priority of ‘Ethics’ in the Work of Levinas”, writes that since the self is “[e]thically bound to the other, I am obedient to the Other, with my freedom delayed. This obedience is not the subjection and submission [one] has come to understand as obedience in common meaning.”\(^13\) Submission, in common understanding, requires the foregoing of one’s autonomous will in favour of the will of an-other. However, in Levinasian ethics the “self is not autonomous for it is constituted through face to face relationships and always in line with the expectations of the Other.”\(^14\)
There can never be an autonomous self in Levinas’s ontological perspective. For, the self is only recognized as self in light of the Other. It can never exist apart from the other and therefore is necessarily linked in existence to the Other. “That is to say, while enlightenment philosophies make conditional upon an autonomous self, Levinas makes the self and subjectivity conditional upon ethics.”¹⁵ David Knights and Majella O’Leary write that for “Levinas, the notion of the self is generated not by the self but rather through engagement with the Other, and engagement that is defined by a sense of responsibility.”¹⁶ Therefore, one can not use the common understanding of “submission” when discussing the submission of the self to the Other. It is a submission that is inherent in the existence of the self.

It is at this point that one can begin to understand that the responsibility the self owes to the Other “does not demand reciprocity; it is a non-symmetrical relation…the unchosen responsibility to the other cannot be passed on (there is no substitution in the ethic of responsibility).”¹⁷ The self is ethically elected to a responsibility to the Other and is accordingly “both already obligated and never sufficiently obligated”¹⁸ in its responsibilities by virtue of its conditional existence. Thus, Levinas’s ethics provides a secure foundation for ethical responsibility when face-to-face with the other. Simply put, the self possesses the obligation to always care for the other prior to itself. For, as was shown above, the self is ontologically dependant on the other.

While Levinasian ethics well account for ethical interactions between two persons, the reality is that ethical actions are never limited to just two persons. Even Levinas admits of this reality. In an interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas states that “there are always at least three persons”¹⁹ and as “soon as there are three, the ethical relationship with the other becomes
political and enters into the totalizing discourse of ontology.”\textsuperscript{20} It is here that the weaknesses in Levinas’s ethics begin to present themselves.

The reality of ethical relations admits of responsibilities to more than one other, it is inevitable that conflicts of responsibility will eventually arise. Since Levinas’s ethics admits of only the self and the other in its account of necessary responsibility, one must turn to an outside law for mediation when such conflicts emerge. Knights and O’Leary write that despite “Levinas prioritizing ethics over the self, he is quick to resort to the law or moral rules whenever there is some tension or conflict between different others.”\textsuperscript{21} However, there can be no guarantee of satisfactory laws or moral rules without a responsibility to the self.

While Levinasian ethics allows for the building of a conception of the self in terms of the other, it does not allow ethical responsibility to be founded upon a conception of the self. In order for a practical application of Levinas’s ethics to withstand philosophical scrutiny, it must allow for recourse of action that can be taken when conflicting ethical obligations arise. Such recourse can be found in Christine Korsgaard’s neo-Kantian ethical theory argued for in her book \textit{The Sources of Normativity}. In her work, Korsgaard argues for a conception of the self that is rooted partly in a Levinasian ‘Other’ and partly in a Kantian ‘self’ and provides normative force for ethical action. She writes that actions are ‘normative’ in light of the claims ethical standards make through what she calls one’s Practical Identity. It is to this conception that Levinasian ethics should turn for an understanding of how to act when conflicts of ethical responsibility arise between two different others.

Korsgaard’s practical identity is to be understood “as a description under which [one] value[s] [oneself], a description under which [one] find[s] [ones] life to be worth living and [ones] actions to be worth undertaking”\textsuperscript{22}. One reaches this practical identity through reflective
endorsement of ideas and conceptions in light of the relation the self possesses to the Other. Korsgaard writes that “the reflective structure of the mind is a source of ‘self-consciousness’ because it forces us to have a conception of ourselves”\(^{23}\) and that the conception one reaches is comprised of principles or laws that one “regard[s] as being expressive of [oneself].”\(^{24}\) She continues to argue that “all of these identities give rise to reasons and obligations”\(^{25}\) and that ones “reasons express [ones] identity…[and ones] obligations spring from what that identity forbids.”\(^{26}\)

Korsgaard’s conception of the self is thus, one that is rooted in the other. For in order to build a conception of ones identity the theory demands that one understands the principles or laws one feels as being “expressive of oneself”. These principles, in turn, are rooted in the relation one possesses to the Other. For instance, the role of a “Father” can only be understood in relation to an-other. Accordingly, roles such as “Senator”, “Wife”, “Boss”, “Man”, “Woman”, “Friend”, “Lawyer”, “Physician”, and “Spiritual Leader” all place the self in a relationship with the other, and it is that relationship that defines the roles that would be demanded of a person. Thus, the self, while important to understanding of ethical responsibility still falls in the shadow of the Other. One must first judge the ethical responsibility one has towards the other, and only then, if conflicting responsibilities emerge, could one fall back onto a conception of the self, a “practical identity”, for assistance in determining a course of action. Accordingly, a Korsgaardian ethics would provide a foundation for mediating conflicts between ‘Others’ for it allows recourse if, and when, such conflicts emerge.

With the holes in Levinasian ethics closed by the inclusion of a conception of the self in Korsgaard “practical identity”, and the secondary ethics that accompany such a conception, one can now more readily, and successfully, employ an ethics of responsibility that places the other
first and foremost. For instance, consider the following thought experiment. A man is taking a trip with his son. At some point an accident occurs on the road they are travelling on that causes them, and another vehicle, to lose control and fall into the river that borders the road. The man safely reaches the bank of the river only to realize that both his son and the lone passenger of the other vehicle were able to exit their vehicles but are unable to reach the shore and are beginning to drown.

In a purely Levinasian understanding of ethical responsibility the man would be unable to make a moral claim over saving one person over the other. While he might elect to save his son, he would have no basis for claiming an ethical responsibility to his son over the other individual. However, on a Korsgaardian conception of the self, grounded upon an assumed “practical identity”, the father, by virtue of claiming a special relation to his son for himself, would be able to justify saving his son over the other individual.

One might object to this argument by asking what of a situation in which an individual, when confronted by conflicting responsibilities to two others, is unable to make a claim based on “practical identity”? For example, one might turn to the above mentioned thought experiment and ask what if the man is forced into saving only one of two strangers? The argument for “practical identity” would fail to account for such a situation.

However, this argument is a non-starter. For it is true that an assumed “practical identity” would be unable to account for ethical responsibility between two strangers, it is false to demand that a Korsgaardian conception of the self be able to account for all instances in which conflicts of responsibility arise between two others. If one was confronted with a situation as outlined by the rejoinder above, the person faced by the conflict would fulfil his ethical responsibility to the Other if he makes an attempt at saving at least one person.
Levinas’s ethics of responsibility provide a great foundation for beginning to understand the obligations one possesses to the other and the demands that those obligations place on an individual. However, when conflicts arise between two others, Levinas’s ethics fail to provide the ability to ground moral action. It is when a conception of the self is included as a secondary foundation for an ethics of responsibility that one is able to secure a moral course of action. In developing a conception of the self that would successfully allow for such conflict mediation, one can turn to the theory of “Practical Identity” that is argued for by Christine Korsgaard. The understanding of oneself and the roles one assumes for oneself that a theory of “practical identity” demands, allows for a grounding of ethical responsibility that still accounts for the importance of the other in Levinasian ethics. For the ‘roles’ one assumes can only be understood when in relation to an-other.
Works Cited


2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. p. 6.
5 Ibid. p. 12.
8 Ibid. p. 16-17.
11 Ibid. p. 18.
12 Ibid.
15 Ibid. p. 135.
16 Ibid. p. 136.
17 Ibid. p. 133-134.
20 Ibid. p. 21-22.
23 Ibid. p. 100.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.