

Levinas on Forgiveness

Christopher ketcham

*Corresponding Author: Christopher ketcham, Email Id: chrisketcham@msn.com

ABSTRACT

Emmanuel Levinas says we are infinitely responsible for the infinitely different other. However, he has trouble forgiving Martin Heidegger for his Nazi past. This study asks whether forgiveness is a necessary part of responsibility and suggests that the answer is yes if we are indeed infinitely responsible to the other. This is important because once responsibility is redefined as other than infinite, its moral authority can be eroded by degree.

Keywords: Responsibility; forgiveness; Emmanuel Levinas; Martin Heidegger; Mishna; Talmud, Gemara

INTRODUCTION

In a conference presentation *Toward the Other* in 1963, Levinas finds it difficult to forgive Martin Heidegger for his Nazi past. He assigns to the intellectual other a different form of responsibility than an ordinary other. This troubles me because it does what Levinas continually spoke against and that is the categorizing or totalizing the infinitely different other. It is my thesis that forgiveness is required in responsibility. Forgiveness helps to restore the Levinasian asymmetrical relationship when it has been damaged by a wrongdoing and restores the infinite other's alterity from being [bracketed] as an undeserving transgressor. This study begins with a summary of Levinas's theory of responsibility to the other.

THE INFINITE OTHER

Levinas complains, "Modern man persists in his being as a sovereign who is merely concerned to maintain the powers of his sovereignty" [1. p. 78, *Ethics as First Philosophy*, emphasis in original]. Rather than center human ethics in the self, the egoist me, Levinas locates ethics in the other. He says, "To be in oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other. The ground of expression is goodness" [2. p. 183]. This goodness can be expressed as responsibility: "Responsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along. A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself" [1. p. 83, *Ethics as First Philosophy*]. In fact, this devotion to the

other should be in the form of actual substitution for the other even to the point of being a hostage to the other. Levinas explains, "For under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage" [3. p. 112]. However, this responsibility, even substitution for the other, is asymmetrical because I cannot require reciprocity from the other, "In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his business" [4. p. 98]. This stands to reason because if my responsibility is unlimited to the other, withholding responsibility to wait for reciprocity violates the infinite nature of the requirement. If responsibility to the other is without limit, and in fact, I am bound to substitute myself for the other to serve the other and cannot expect reciprocity, must I also forgive the other? Is this also a requirement of responsibility? In *Toward the Other*, Levinas seems to suggest that forgiveness is not as absolute as his notion of responsibility and therefore presents a question for discussion whether forgiveness is contained within the notion of responsibility.

TOWARD THE OTHER

Levinas begins his commentary in *Toward the Other* by reading a passage from the Tractate Yoma which discusses the need for forgiveness. Levinas's chosen translation of the Mishna associated with this Talmudic commentary says:

The transgressions of man toward God are forgiven him by the Day of Atonement; the transgressions against other people are not forgiven him by the Day of Atonement if he has

not first appeared the other person.[5. p. 12, Emphasis in original]

Levinas outlines his objective in his commentary: “My effort always consists in extricating from this theological language meanings addressing themselves to reason”[5. p. 14] He makes no claim, he says, that he is speaking about the exigencies, histories, or experiences of or with God. Rather, he says, “I am trying to shine a light on it that drives from the very place it has in the texts, from its context, which is understandable to us to the degree that it speaks of the moral experience of human beings”[5. p. 14]. In other words, of what practical use can one make of these sacred texts which one can apply to everyday life? He then categorizes the Talmud with, “Religious experience, at least for the Talmud, can only be primarily a moral experience”[5. p. 15] Therefore, his scope in his reflections and commentary will not be religion but ethics.

The Mishna passage says that God does not require contrition by a transgressor in order to be forgiven for transgressions made against God. God will forgive these by the day of atonement.¹ My relationship then with God is exclusive—God and me—and does not depend upon an intervening other such as a rabbi or priest. Levinas demonstrates that the purest form of responsibility is associated with God itself. God is doing the most responsible thing by giving forgiveness which only God can forgive for transgressions against God. This does appear on the surface to give credibility for an ethics that requires one to be responsible to the infinite other, in this case, the more infinite than infinite God. God is acting responsibly towards the infinitely anterior other by offering forgiveness by the day of atonement. This presumably is a promise of responsibility in the form of forgiveness, not an immediate forgiveness, but one that can be deferred ‘by the day of atonement’ which is a date on the calendar, Yom Kippur.

On the other hand, if a fellow human does not forgive me for transgressions against that other, then God is not responsible for providing forgiveness. It is between the other and me to work this out. However, Michael L. Morgan explains, “And Levinas takes Akiba to have meant that we should distinguish the application of the principles of justice impartially, with no

attention to the particularity of the claimant, from the act of mercy, which comes after the judgment is given and attends to the particularity of the claimant and his petition, his request for forgiveness”[6. p. 7].

Levinas brings together the idea of forgiveness to the other, the face-to-face other, and the idea of justice when he says through Morgan, “Don’t look at the face before the verdict. Once the verdict has been given, look at the face”[6. p. 8]. Levinas brings his idea of face into context here. The face, Levinas sees as bearing the anarchic trace of God and in the passivity I endure by being responsible to the other [3. p. 196, Footnote 21]. It is the face that brings us to the realization of the need for responsibility to and for the other.

According to Levinas’s commentary, it is God’s business to forgive transgressions against God alone. God forgives by a date certain. It is the business of humans to forgive each other or not. It appears that the delay and even denial of forgiveness is possible in human interactions.

We can say that mere mortals are not God and cannot meet the conditions only God can. However, we have an unlimited duty of responsibility to the other. Can we defer such responsibility with a promise like that of God (forgiveness at a later date) and still fulfill our absolute duty to be responsible to the other? Levinas responds to this question, “It is well understood that faults toward one’s neighbor are ipso facto offenses toward God”[5. p. 16, Emphasis in original]. Yet the Mishna says that offenses committed against a neighbor must be forgiven by the neighbor for them to be forgiven by God by the day of atonement. Ipso facto then must mean that while these offenses are technically against God, their forgiveness is nonetheless not guaranteed by God until first given by one human to another. One interpretation of this idea might be that in the realm of God, God commands, but in the realm of humans, we oversee our own ethics because God has no interest in meddling with the everyday affairs of humans. If this is the case, we can create an ethics as demanding as infinite responsibility for the other, any other.

There is still the problem of temporality. God can wait until the day of atonement to forgive; what about humans? Levinas provides no guidance even in this commentary as to the temporal nature of forgiveness: must it be immediate, or can it be deferred? In the asymmetrical relationship of responsibility, the

¹ Subject, of course, to the performance of important Jewish rituals and the like.

other need not reciprocate my responsible response. Say that I am responsible to the other, but the other harms me. I must accept this harm and cannot harm the other or cease being responsible to the other in retaliation. Must I forgive the other who has harmed me? Staying with the other who harms me. When the other asks me to forgive the other for the harm the other has caused me, must I forgive? Consider this question this way: the other carries the burden of transgression against me, and if I do not forgive the other, this burden may never be reduced for the other. In other words, by not giving forgiveness, I continue the suffering of the other. Is that not a violation of unlimited responsibility?

I cannot demand responsibility from the other and it appears that this includes forgiveness; it must be voluntarily given. However, it is not an act of responsibility to withhold forgiveness to the other if it is the responsible thing to do. Levine's ideal of radical passivity and substitution for the other as he explains in *Totality and Infinity* require my accepting what the other will do to or with me while still being required to be responsible to the other[2. p. 259].

Levinas outlines a slightly different interpretation of the idea of forgiveness through the commentary of the Gemara in *Toward the Other*, "The guilty party must recognize his fault. The offended party must want to receive the entreaties of the offending party. Further, no person can forgive if forgiveness has not been asked him by the offender, if the guilty party has not tried to appease the offended" [5. p. 19]. I can only offer forgiveness to the other if it has been asked for only by the other who has tried to appease the offense to me. However, later Levinas records further commentary of the Gemara which gives the unforgiven penitent an out, "One must seek the forgiveness of the offended party but one is freed with respect to him if he refuses it three times"[5. p. 21]. If I am responsible to the offended party, and gaining forgiveness from the other is more responsible than not, do I have the right to stop asking for forgiveness? For example, the giving of forgiveness might help the other reduce stress which is more beneficial to someone than maintaining the stress of anger. On the other hand, when does the asking for forgiveness turn to badgering? One of the problems with responsibility as Levinas envisions the notion, is that we are not very adept at assessing what it is we must do to be responsible to and for the

other. Given these concerns, how does Levinas himself deal with one whom he has difficult forgiving: Martin Heidegger?

FORGIVING HEIDEGGER

Recall that Morgan mentioned that Levinas said, "we should distinguish the application of the principles of justice impartially, with no attention to the particularity of the claimant." Then what about Heidegger? Heidegger became rector of Fryeburg University in 1933; shortly thereafter he joined the Nazi party. In his inaugural address he gave as rector he extolled Nazi virtues. He enforced anti-Semitic rules during his tenure as rector (only one year), and in his recently made public black notebooks, many see anti-Semitic comments and thoughts[7.]. Levinas relates his dilemma of Heidegger to the commentary in the Gemara in this lengthy but important quotation:

But perhaps there is something altogether different in all this. One can, if pressed to the limit, forgive the one who has spoken unconsciously. But it is very difficult to forgive Rab, who was fully aware and destined for a great fate, which was prophetically revealed to his master. One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger. If Hanina could not forgive the just and humane Rab because he was also the brilliant Rab, it is even less possible to forgive Heidegger. Here I am brought back to the present, to the new attempts to clear Heidegger, to take away his responsibility-unceasing attempts which, it must be admitted, are at the origin of this colloquium.[5. p. 25]

Levinas is saying is it more difficult for him to forgive the intelligent other who do not seek forgiveness through atonement. We have no evidence that Heidegger asked for forgiveness for his Nazi past.

If responsibility includes forgiveness, Levinas must forgive a Heidegger he meets face-to-face if forgiveness is necessary to be responsible to Heidegger, or he risks turning responsibility into something that is optional. If forgiveness is not something that is in the realm of responsibility, then his meeting face-to-face with Heidegger need not include forgiveness. What if Levinas never meets Heidegger again face-to-face? Is he required to be responsible to the distant Heidegger? What if Heidegger atones for his transgression into Nazism, what then does this require of Levinas? We are back to the same

question again: does responsibility include forgiveness? If I am responsible to the other close to me, and tangentially to all others, then is proximity to the other a requirement for forgiveness? Or, should I forgive even if the other has not asked for it and/or who is far away if it is the most responsible thing I can do for the other? Is there any instance where one can give forgiveness without atonement or being asked to forgive that is responsible to the other? Or, is forgiveness always a form of reciprocity which Levinas explains is the business of the other and I should never expect reciprocity. Yet, how can forgiveness be excluded from the responsible response if it is necessarily a part of what is required for me to be responsible to the other?

CONCLUSION

Should Levinas forgive Heidegger? Levinas through his reading of the Gemara suggests that one cannot give to another forgiveness unless it has been asked. Giving forgiveness to the transgressor who asks reduces the useless suffering of the other. Let us assume Heidegger does not ask for forgiveness and does not ever understand that his Nazi beliefs and actions caused harm. Is it still a requirement of responsibility that he be forgiven? Who is helped by such forgiveness, Levinas or Heidegger. The letting go of resentment, anger to give forgiveness reduces the suffering of the Levinas who has bracketed Heidegger as [wrongdoer]. This may be true, and Heidegger may never know that Levinas has forgiven him. However, I maintain that forgiveness restores the asymmetrical relationship when it has been damaged by a wrong doing and restores the infinity of the alterior other. Forgiveness prepares the ground for infinite responsibility which is why forgiveness is integral to responsibility.

Onan Serban comments on this relationship, "At this level, Levinas is elaborating his own paradox, defining forgiveness as what remains outside the Subject and not into it, allowing the continuous connection of the Self as an I with the Other: forgiveness ensures this fidelity coming from outside, a forgiveness developed as a right and as a duty" [8. p. 73].² The process

² Hanna Arendt concurs, suggested than any act is irreversible, but the faculty of forgiving "...serves to undo the deeds of the past whose 'sins' hang like Damocles' sword over every new generation..." [9. p. 237]" Arendt says about trespassing and other wrongdoing, "...it needs forgiving, dismissing, in

of forgiveness is a repairing of the self to be prepared once again to serve the other. In a way, forgiveness is my restoring the other to that infinite other without precondition. If forgiveness is a right and duty I maintain that this also suggests that it is a responsibility as well.

In the discussion in the Gemara, the transgressor or wrongdoer need not ask for forgiveness after it has been thrice refused. This is a statement of custom but phenomenologically ceasing to ask for forgiveness will not ease the burden or suffering of the transgressor or the transgressed. The wrongdoer who is thrice refused is given no way to ease the suffering of the transgression. Instead of mitigating suffering for both, the refuser brings upon the refused useless suffering for which forgiveness by the one refused may be the only source of mitigation. The violence of the denial of forgiveness signals an end to responsibility, no longer a being for the other (in radical passivity) and creates a new relationship for which the face has now become an object of derision. Conflicts can escalate from the denial of forgiveness as they can from the withdrawal of responsibility to the other.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that infinite responsibility to the other, any other, is an ideal, aspirational at best, but not very practical. As Leah Kalmanson and Sarah Matticesuggest, Levinas is under no illusion that we will be responsible all the time. We will make mistakes, assume, and may not understand what the other requires [10. p. 128]. While unlimited is a formidable requirement, what degrees of deviation would you permit? Would your degrees of deviation be different from someone else? What about other societies? Levinas knew that justice whittles away at infinite responsibility by degree because it tries to be all things to all persons. However, starting at the point where responsibility is without limit asks us to fundamentally reconsider ethics. This is why it is so important that forgiveness be included in the concept of responsibility rather than outside. If Levinas cannot forgive Heidegger, even the unrepentant Heidegger, then the continuity of his entire theory of responsibility to the other has been irrupted. This, of course, is an impossibility because responsibility cannot be irrupted. Forgiveness therefore is integral to responsibility.

order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly." [9. P. 240]

REFERENCES

- [1] Levinas E. *The Levinas Reader*: Wiley-Blackwell; 1989.
- [2] Levinas E. *Totality and Infinity: An essay on exteriority*. New York, New York: Springer; 1969.
- [3] Levinas E. *Otherwise Than Being*. Pittsburg, Pa.: Duquesne University Press; 1974.
- [4] Levinas E, Nemo P. *Ethics and infinity*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press; 1985.
- [5] Levinas E. *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press; 1994.
- [6] Morgan ML. *Levinas's Ethical Politics*. Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press; 2016.
- [7] Faye E. *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy* New Haven, London: Yale University Press; 2009.
- [8] Șerban O. A Person Imagines Forgiving a Subject. Three Perspectives on the Rest of Forgiving, Following Jankélévitch, Derrida and Levinas: the Unpardonable of the Ipseity, "Outside the Subject". *Annals of the University of Bucharest-Philosophy Series*. 2014;63(2):57-76.
- [9] Arendt H. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1958.
- [10] Kalmanson L, Mattice S. The De of Levinas: Cultivating the Heart-Mind of Radical Passivity. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. 2015;10(1):113-29.

Citation: Christopher Ketcham, "Levinas on Forgiveness", *Journal of Philosophy and Ethics*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 20-24, 2019.

Copyright: © 2019 Christopher Ketcham. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.