

Love as absolute challenge – also for education

Abstract: The other (alter), through the lens of Levinas's criticism of the same (neutrality), is always a unique other who stands up to any generalisation and homogenisation. According to a heteronomous schedule of ethics by E. Levinas, "face of the other", presence of their personal Thou in the sphere of life of a moral subject, precedes own being of this subject by their calling for an answer. Uniqueness of interpersonal relationship and appeal of the exterior Thou challenges human to exclusivity and to infinite self-abandonment in favour of the other (challenges to love). This ethical horizon is not possible to be ever reached and closed, it is impossible in fact, too difficult to be accepted as a norm of everyday life, mainly life in a community, society, state. Presence of "the third" (the political) in the sphere of morality is posed as a theoretical problem: What kind of ethics should be designed in a society of many "others" where Thou is inevitably turned to He/She, included in socio-political structures and relationships of justice? Is it possible to talk about some continuum between the relationship to the other and the relationship to a community? The final part of the paper seeks to answer these questions and pedagogical implications of demands of love in moral education are pointed out.

Keywords: E. Levinas, ethics of the other person, philosophy of dialogue, moral education, love

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Introduction

Love has various meanings and its scope is necessarily polysemic. For the purpose of this article, all relationships, acts and attitudes of charity, giving, care, support, help, altruism or prosociality are considered as relationships of 'love'. It is love 'as such', as an anthropological and ethical phenomenon, that constitutes the humanity of people. The intention of this study is to philosophically examine the moral dimension of acts of love, acts of good-doing to 'the Other', that is, acts of specific help, care and love devoted to the unique Other. Therefore, in this article the theme of love is directly connected to the theme of the relationship to 'the Other', which gives rise to questions like: Who is the Other? What does his or her subjectivity in regard to the loving person and their morality, in particular, mean? How does the very existence of some Thou bind to responsibility for them? Questions of this kind are understood as an inseparable part of inquiring about the essence of love. In this paper, significant attention is devoted to the issue I and Thou based on the philosophy of dialogue, in particular. In this perspective, the Other human being is the one 'opposite me', always a living, unobjectifiable and infinitely transcendental challenge for a specific and un-generalisable relationship of respect.

Here, however, the problem of the exclusivity of the Other, expressed by the following questions, emerges: If Thou is unique and infinitely transcending all my possibilities of fulfilling their demands, does it not call for my isolation from the world and society? Does not the appellative of the Other urge me to neglect 'the other Others'? These questions open up the issue of the social and political dimensions of prosociality and they are examined in the context of the morality of justice.

The second level of the research is represented by the level of education, which is approached particularly from the point of view of moral education. Since the prosocial act (act of giving one's self) is examined from the perspective of the realisation of one's own potentiality and intentional development, the main aim is to examine the mutual position of two facts: the morality of a person as a protagonist of the giving act and the possibilities of a person's growth through this unselfish act. Both poles of this relationship (personal and practical-educational) will be examined through the lens of the philosophy of dialogue and the ethics of virtue, in which a deeply existential, interior, even ontological dimension of morality and development of an individual is strongly emphasised. This view enables us to see if and to what extent an act of love to the Other is understood as a substantial part of the realisation of a person, their 'path

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of virtue, path of self-development. Based on this aim, we philosophically ask what role is played by the development of one's own moral character in the development of a prosocial (non-egoistic) setting of a shaping person and, on the contrary, if the 'face of the Other', which binds me to responsibility and care, has a direct connection with the cultivation of virtue. At the pedagogical level, the question is posed as follows: Is there a relevant connection between education to prosociality and development of character? Or, briefly: Does a helping act change the morality of a person, *et vice versa*, does moral maturity of a human being strengthen their readiness to help?

In order to answer these questions, I decided to deepen selected aspects of the ethics of dialogue, while bearing in mind the dynamic aspect of approaching the Other.

Who is the Other?

The philosophy of dialogue, which intersects with personalistic philosophy and ethics, was chosen as an inspiring source of reflection on the relationship to the Other and the authenticity of helping love. Particularly, the focus is on Emanuel Levinas's ethical conception. A quotation by H. Arendt aptly illustrates the content connection between personalism and Aristotle's understanding of friendship: "Love in the broader sphere of human affairs corresponds to a personal relationship that may be best described as 'respect'. Respect is like the Aristotelian *philia politiké*, a sort of 'political friendship' that does not require proximity and intimacy. This relationship is an expression of respect for a person."¹

Civic friendship is a virtue of broader co-existence, in which respect for the Other person is a cultural condition for the pursuit of a good life. However, this quality of co-existence with others in a community has its origins in an elementary relation to the Other, the close one, a specific Thou, with whom I develop a deep and unique story of friendship. The basic relationship between I and Thou is an operative symbol, an effective sign and a starting point for all positive social relationships, marked by the nature of unity, generosity, respect and mutual responsibility.

It seems that the outlined continuity between the relationship of I-Thou and *politiké philía* is apparent and it does not need to be proved. However, this aspect gets problematic when the following question is analysed in depth together with Levinas: Who is a friend, a neighbour, the Other, to whom I turn my goodwill? Who is the Other? The Other is above all different than I and at the same time, different to everything else. Levinas understood that, in the identification of the Other, their existence needs to be differentiated from 'the same', the entire, anonymous, total and general being (there is, Fr.: *il y a*) that covers everything with its non-differentiatedness and impersonality. When we turn to the Other, we turn to an 'alien', to something and someone that does not belong to the familiar, obvious, one's own country domi-

¹ H. Arendtová, *Vita activa neboli. O činném životě*, Praha 2007, p. 316.

nated by me. An active movement to the Other suggests a movement 'elsewhere', outside one's self, into terra incognita in the strongest meaning of the word. "The Other we metaphysically crave for, is not 'Other' like the bread I eat, place I live in, country I dwell in, like sometimes I am for myself. [...] Metaphysical desire heads toward something completely different, absolutely different"². The desire for the Other is not based on a need, since a need is a state in which a human person lacks something, i.e. they are incomplete, thus, they are existentially nostalgic for something they at least partially know in advance (the Other as an alter ego). However, the metaphysical desire does not crave for a return, but for something completely different, something we have never contained. If we talk about love as of saturation of some noble hunger, then it is not real love. Real love longs for something that transcends every fulfilment and deepens the desire itself further. It is a desire for the radically heterogeneous. Realisation of this existential desire paradoxically increases the distance between us, since it reveals authentic exteriority, difference, unicity of each Thou. The difference of the Other is the difference of the noble, the highest, the infinite, the invisible. The metaphysical desire for the absolutely Other 'presupposes unselfishness of goodness'³.

Does it mean that radical separateness of the Other can cast us into solitary confinement? That non-transferability of 'the Other' to 'the same' condemns our existence to eternal isolation, slavery of the 'teeming' totality of being (there is)? Levinas shows that such a fatal fate would await a human being if that being were a primal state, a gift of the vicious world in which we as subjects would suddenly find ourselves. According to him, on the contrary, the shapeless teeming, the anonymous depth of a night⁴ are not primal. A unique relationship is 'not the being' (Germ. Sein) of the existent (Germ. Seiende), but the relationship to someone who is the existent. Ontology is not primal, ethics is. Ethics means questioning the spontaneous egoism of 'the same' by the presence of 'the Other'. "The strangeness of the Other – their irreducibility to Me, my ideas and my possession – occurs as questioning of my spontaneity, as ethics."⁵ The transfer of the Other to the same is then the essence of immorality. To know ontologically is to surprise in an existent confronted that by which it is not this existent, this stranger, that by which it is somehow betrayed, surrenders, is given in the horizon in which it loses itself and appears, lays itself open to grasp, becomes a concept. Conceptualisation means the suppression and appropriation of the Other, a power transformation of the Other to the Same. Cogito (eng.: I think) finally means 'I can' (meaning 'I have the power to state'), that is, depredatory appropriation of what is. Ontology is actually philosophy of power, it is 'egoistic', impersonal, inhuman, without respect to dignity and, eventually, it is unjust because it violently transforms the Other to the Same. The opposite of neutralisation is transcendence, confirmation of

² E. Lévinas, *Být pro druhého*, Praha 1997, p. 19.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁴ E. Lévinas, *Existence a ten, kdo existuje*, Praha 1997, p. 47 and further on.

⁵ E. Lévinas, *Totalita a nekonečno*, Praha 1997, p. 28.

‘to be different’ in the person of the Other. Relationship to the Other, by definition, is not reversible. Its mutual changeability would connect I and Thou to one system (We) that would destroy the radical difference of the Other. Transcendence to the infinite is the only possible ethical relationship to the Other. The very radical difference of the Other, however, is possible only when Thou is the Other in the relationship with an element whose essence remains a starting point, it serves as an entrance to the relationship. This element that remains at the starting point of the relationship is I.

What does it mean to be I? In particular, I means to have an identity, or rather, to be in a process of constant finding of one’s own identity across everything that happens to it. I is the original self-creation of identification. It is identical in its transformations, it has a structure of a subject, the first person. I blends with itself, it is the same against all difference, it cannot abandon ‘itself’, it is not someone else. Identification of ‘the same’ in I does not occur as clear tautology ‘I am I’ (as $A=A$), but as a result of existing here at home with oneself, in the way of dwelling, that is, like at one’s home⁶. I am at home in the world, because the world offers (things) or resists (persons) my ownership. Ultimately, the encounter of I and the irreducible diversity of Thou creates the subjectivity of I.

How does the ethical relationship, the relationship of transcendence to the Other take place if its aim is not adjustment, the establishment of the collectivity We? Is such a relationship to Thou possible in which its radical exteriority against I would be kept at the same time? If an authentic relationship cannot be a representation, since the Other would dissolve in the Same, the Other needs to be accepted as different, that is, the distance suggesting difference of the Other needs to be kept. Their difference precedes every initiative, every imperialism of the Same. I and the Other do not create a number, the collectivity I-Thou is not the plural of I. “To accept the Other means to accept their hunger. To accept the Other means to give. But to give to a sovereign lord, the one we address ‘You’ in the dimension of Majesty”⁷. If the Other is to be preserved in their inviolability, I cannot exercise my power, which I exercise over the world, over them. What is the possible nature of the relationship to the Other? Levinas replies that it has the nature of a dialogue. The dialogue, however, cannot be explorative, revealing, but purely relational, it should be immediate revelation, manifestation of sense, presence that cannot be reduced to intellectual opinion. In a dialogue, I comes out of its ipseity, beyond every totality, like face to face. This movement, however, is by definition irreversible. I performs it as a breaking movement of transcendence, not as thinking of the Other but as one’s own conative walk. When I finds itself in a dialogue with Thou, it assigns the Other a right over my egoistic being and apologises for it. Egoistic thinking resides in speaking and adopting an ethical attitude to the Other in responding to their call or revelation. The Other manifests themselves to the first

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 59–60.

one, reveals their face, their presence. “The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse. He who manifests himself comes [...] to his own assistance. He at each instant undoes the form he presents”⁸. The Other, through their naked presence, calls, begs, requires. It is the look of a stranger, widow and orphan. Encounter with the Other is a shock, their silent face causes upheaval and challenge. It evokes in I consciousness of unique responsibility, it is a permanent and unfulfillable challenge for the unstoppable I so that it attempts to cross the abyss to the separated Thou. Subjectivity of I is fully created only after acceptance of this challenge, taking the position of responsibility to the Other.

Levinas, in his works, attacks Heidegger’s fundamental ontology and shows that he betrays the Dasein (the Other, Thou) in favour of the indifferentiability of impersonal being⁹. Heidegger wanted to awake humanity from the sleep of forgetfulness about being, however, he did it at the cost of forgetfulness about the Other. As J. Lacroix states, “for thinking smitten with unity pluralism is embarrassing.”¹⁰ According to Heidegger, being human is from the very beginning co-being (Mit-sein), ‘being with the Other’. However, it is not a dialogical co-being, the relationship between I and Thou is missing. The Other/different is constantly reduced to ‘the same’ in sameness and non-differentiatedness of We. Superficial sociability of human beings looks for fusion as an ideal state, and Heideggerian Miteinandersein (being-with-another) is the collectivity of ‘friends’, an effort for symmetry¹¹. Against the collectivity of persons standing ‘side by side’, Levinas places the collectivity of persons standing ‘face to face’. Morality does not stem from the consciousness that we are together ‘on the same side’ but from the acceptance of the Other so that they take priority over me. The word of the Other, their appeal, determines ethical existence of I. I is in a way ‘promised to the neighbour’, it is chosen to them. Responsibility for the Other is a unique expression of love to neighbour.

Being human is from the very beginning ‘being-for’ (Für-sein), being because of the Other, being-for-the Other. ‘To be for the Other’ is existentially binding, the Other is not beside me, they are in front of me, standing opposite me. My responsibility is not an expression of my freedom, it is not preceded by my generous decision, on the contrary, the responsibility binds me even before my freedom, it precedes it. The chosen (every moral subject) cannot escape it, its moral action has a heteronomous origin. Everybody is ‘hostage to their brother’. The status of a moral subject resides in its passivity, in acceptance of the primary challenge. Here, the paradox of an authentic relationship of love is shown: the loving one is actually passiens (the suffering one, the non-active one, a patient) who is affected by the address of the Other. “Happiness

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 50 (in English version, 1991, p. 66).

⁹ Cf.: E. Lévinas, *Existence a ten, kdo existuje*, Praha 1997b, pp. 30–31; E. Lévinas, *Totalita...*, *op.cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁰ C. Chalierová, *O filosofii Emmanuela Lévinase*, Praha 1993, p. 7.

¹¹ E. Lévinas, *Existence...*, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

and peace are not the true measure of humanity. The human in a subject is awakened when instead of the statement ‘I am’, the subject responds to the calling of the Other ‘here I am’¹². The Biblical *adsum* (‘here I am’, ‘I am ready’, ‘I am available’) takes the meaning of *Für-sein* here. Ethical asymmetry of the Other to me, their infinite challenge, forbids the setting of peace and happiness as the final ideal of life because being is preceded by an extreme concern for the Other, some moral obsession that does not allow me to settle and rest. The ethical appeal of the Other is not based on examination of ‘what is’ but thirsty heads towards to ‘what should be’. The challenge of responsibility for the Other is infinite, it can never be fulfilled. According to Levinas, the Other relates to me and their face calls for me even if they are not concerned for me, even if they do not know me at all. “I have increasingly more responsibility than the Other, I am responsible even for his responsibility”¹³. Here, educational responsibility can be sensed: if I am responsible for responsibility of the Other, I take over the mission to encourage and develop in the Other responsibility for every Thou that appears in front of the Other. This mission, in the right sense a mission to listen, is the teacher’s mission.

If altruism is understood as the will of a human to be good (helpful, well-meaning, generous) to the Other, then Levinas’s ethics is not an ethics of altruism because according to it, I do not decide about good, on the contrary, good fascinates me and captures me. If I see a face, I hear the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill!’. The face is truly naked, vulnerable, exposed to possible violence. The notion of murder includes all forms of violence, such as contempt for the Other, their denial, either by acting, speaking or thinking. For Levinas, the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill!’ is the essence of revelation, everything else is just its consequence.

Thus, in Levinas, no virtues can be identified as learned behaviours. Moral dispositions, which are a prerequisite for good action, are never explicitly mentioned in the terminology of ethics of virtue, especially if we mean its majority interpretation, according to which ‘good character features’ are related to the person of the bearer as the owner.

The philosophy of metaphysical desire for fulfillment (which never takes place) and its realisation through responding to the call of the Other resembles rather Kantian deontology, except that this desire is not determined by the autonomy of will but by the heteronomy of the face of the Other. Instead of the imperative of a universal moral law that commits, commands and forces, in the ethics of encounter with the Other morality is determined by the appeal of responsibility, which unconditionally binds by the heteronomous law ‘Thou shalt not kill!’.

If Kant’s ethical concept deals the term ‘virtue’ as a disposition of a moral subject to act in accordance with an objective coercive principle¹⁴, Levinas’s ethics would, for

¹² C. Chalierová, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

¹⁴ I. Kant, *Základy metafyziky mravů*, Praha 1976, pp. 41, 70.

such disposition, call openness to the Other, willingness to acknowledge own commitment to them, readiness to accept responsibility for them. The acts of recognition of the Other (reverence), respect for their uniqueness, responsibility (non-indifference), care for their lack, unconditional giving (high-mindedness and generosity), acceptance of the Other in their exteriority (patience), love (non-violence), justice (non-abuse of power) would be then included in the register of 'acts of virtue'.

And what about the Others?

In the introduction, a question was posed whether it is possible to conceive 'prosocial' ethics of 'many Others', whether some continuum between the relationship to the Other and the relationship to a community exists. In socio-political structures and relationships providing justice, the distant Other ceases to be Thou and inevitably turns into He/She, blends with totality of the general. Levinas labels this problem as the problem of the so-called 'third'¹⁵. Radical moral responsibility for the unique Other results in a practical issue: how to live (ethically) well in a situation of plurality, physicality, sociality, normativity and the political aspect of a human being? How to transfer the ethics of giving and exclusive love to the Other in the world of society, i.e. everyday life with social and professional relations and tasks with prosaic rules and norms? Co-existence with many takes place in the field of securing justice through agreements, contracts and political consensus regarding the will of the majority. In the original collectivity I-Thou, there is no majority, the requirement of relationship is absolute, it demands involvement of the entire human being. The impossibility that it would refer to the 'other Others,' to 'every Other,' to 'the Other in general' is even more evident.

Levinas clarifies how it is possible that a radical requirement of 'the third' appears in the centre of exclusivity of the relationship of I and Thou. Everything that takes place 'between us' (I and Thou) is related to everybody, and every observing face is standing in the light of public order, even in the case of a private and secret relationship.

Speech as a relationship of the presence of a face is not a challenge for some self-sufficient consociation, forgetting about the universe. "In the eyes of the Other someone third is staring at me – speech is justice [...] The poor one, stranger presents themselves as the one who is equal to me. Their equality in this essential poverty depends on the fact that it refers to the third who is present in an encounter like this and whom in their lack the Other already serves"¹⁶. The Other is never alone in the relationship to me, I need to take responsibility over the third one, who is next to them. I even need to choose between them, ask who has priority and who needs to be protected. And thus, the epiphany of the face of the Other is a lordly command to me

¹⁵ E. Lévinas, *Totalita..., op.cit.*, p. 189.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

that ‘orders me to command’. “The presence of the face – of the infinitely Other – is the lack, the presence of someone third (that is, the entire humankind that is watching us) and it is a command ordering to command”¹⁷. The Other orders me to care for the order of justice, public morality and good institutions for their sake. ‘The command ordering to command’ is a pedagogical challenge: The Other asks me to cultivate social and political relationships, structures and agencies of power, even to establish and demand normative order for the sake of the Other. My activity of the care for ‘the third’ is an activity of cultivation, refinement and shaping of Others (children, youth, pupils, students) who currently and prospectively create the order of justice. Moral education focused on authentication of the relationship I and Thou is inseparable from education to respect for social normativity that provides justice.

It does not hold, in a society, that the innocent never suffer. The Other asks me for justice, mediated by rules. It is not sufficient to teach morality without institutions. A moral subject is forced to descend from heaven to earth, their moral tools and customs that they developed in the collectivity I-Thou need to be reviewed and adapted to life in collectivity with ‘the third’¹⁸.

In any case, just institutions are those that listen to the requirements of the Other, respect heteronomy in which the Other calls us and challenges us. The transition to political order is a transition from love to justice, but to justice respecting the requirements of love. Ensuring such justice is a political task, or – as Levinas says – ‘the wisdom of love’¹⁹. According to classical theories of the social contract (e.g. Hobbes), it is a matter of political wisdom to ensure the preservation of life and rights of individuals who are led to each other by natural egoism. These theories state that the most important value of human beings is assertion of themselves, development of their own personality. However, according to Levinas, the role of the political is not to limit the limitlessness of violence, but to limit the limitlessness of altruism. Generosity towards one Other could cause injustice somewhere else, to someone else, or even wrongs to someone third, whose voice I overheard or did not capture. “Love to the other cannot overlook the care for justice. Care means to compare the incomparable, to compare the other with the third one. In Levinas, this moment is the birth of the political”²⁰.

The act of justice presupposes reduction of persons to measurable quantities, the act of abolishing the other as the Other and their conversion to the Same. Such an act – for the introduction of justice – implies violence, that is, the exercise of injustice towards the other. It is a paradox, however, it must not gain an inappropriate dimension in which the face-to-face position would no longer be possible. If that were the case, community would become totalitarian and would lose legitimacy. Community is legitimate when it allows the birth of communities in which fraternity can take

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 189.

¹⁸ E. Lévinas, *Etika a nekonečno*, Praha 1994, p. 180.

¹⁹ Cf. C. Chalierová, *op.cit.*, p. 32 and further.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

place, that is, a situation where every person can become a face for me, get rid of anonymity and be close to me. Justice therefore must not become self-serving and insensitive to the uniqueness of every human.

The paper is an outcome of the project Vega No. 1/0056/19.

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