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Am I My Brother's Keeper? Understanding Emmanuel Levinas and Our Responsibility to the Other in Times of Crisis

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Abstract
This paper produced an interpretative analysis of Emmanuel Levinas redefined the meaning of moral responsibility by rooting it in our encounter with another person—the Other. For him, responsibility is not a matter of choice, agreement, or mutual benefit, but something deeper and more radical: it is infinite, immediate, and one-sided. This paper explores Levinas' concept of responsibility and reflects on its meaning in everyday life, especially when we face situations where helping others comes at a cost. Using real-life examples like caring for the vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic and welcoming refugees, I share how Levinas' philosophy challenges our understanding of ethics and calls us to live beyond ourselves.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, Responsibility to the Other, Ethical philosophy, Brother's keeper, Moral obligation

Introduction

There are times when life confronts us with a difficult question: What do I owe others—especially when it's inconvenient, risky, or uncomfortable? Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher shaped by the horrors of the Holocaust and the trauma of war, gives a bold answer: everything.

When I first encountered Levinas' idea of responsibility, it felt foreign and overwhelming. How can anyone carry infinite responsibility for someone else? But the more I thought about it, the more I began to see it in real life—in parents who sacrifice their dreams for their children, in frontlines who risked their lives during the pandemic, in strangers who rescue others during disasters. Maybe Levinas wasn't exaggerating. Maybe he was simply reminding us of the human capacity for deep, selfless care.

I personally love to study Levinasian Ethics because as an educator, servant of God, and a youth leader—specifically as Sangguniang Kabataan Chairperson—I do have numerous responsibilities. I want to explore what Emmanuel Levinas really means by responsibility. This paper explores Levinas' concept of responsibility and connects it with situations that challenge our moral instincts, such as helping the sick, the poor, or the displaced. I also reflect on my own experiences and thoughts, and how Levinas helps us rediscover the heart of what it means to be truly ethical.

Levinas' Concept of Responsibility: A Radical Call to Care

Emmanuel Levinas believed that ethics begins with the face of the Other—not with rules like in deontological ethics, logic, or rights, but with the immediate, unspoken demand we feel when we see another human being in need. In his famous work *Totality and Infinity* (1961), he writes that the face of the Other says, "Thou shalt not kill" (Levinas, 1961) [8]. That doesn't mean just physically killing someone—it means denying their dignity, their life, their value. As Davis (1996) [5] explains, the Levinasian "face" is not merely physical but the trace of the infinite—an ethical summons that cannot be ignored.

What struck me most was Levinas' idea that responsibility is not something we choose. It's already there, the moment we meet the Other. Even if I don't know the person, even if they owe me nothing, even if it's inconvenient, I am still responsible. According to Butler (2004) [2], recognizing another's precarity is already an ethical claim upon us—an idea deeply rooted in Levinasian responsibility.

It reminds me of something simple but powerful: when you see someone crying on the street, your heart doesn't ask for permission—it reacts. That reaction, Levinas might say, is the beginning of ethics. And unlike contracts, his ethics is

asymmetrical—meaning, I am responsible for the Other, even if they're not responsible for me.

Real-Life Example: Responsibility During the Pandemic

One of the most powerful real-life situations that tested our sense of responsibility was the COVID-19 pandemic. I remember the fear, the isolation, and the constant uncertainty. But amid the crisis, I saw something deeply Levinasian: people helping others, not because they had to, but because they felt called to. This connects with what Wear, Aultman, and Dittus (2006) [14] discuss about ethical duty in medical contexts—where responsibility often precedes any formal agreement.

I think of nurses who barely slept, teachers who adapted overnight for their students, neighbors delivering food to the elderly, local officials who monitored the situation in each barangay or town. These weren't acts of heroism for applause—they were acts of responsibility**,** often invisible and exhausting.

I also think about the simple but difficult decision to wear a mask or stay home, not for our own safety, but for others—especially the immunocompromised, the elderly, the vulnerable. That small sacrifice captures what Levinas meant by being "for-the-Other." In *Otherwise than Being* (1981), he wrote, "I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, even if I am persecuted by the Other" (Levinas, 1981, p. 100) [9]. That line stays with me. It reminds me that real responsibility is not about rewards or fairness—it's about recognizing the sacredness of the Other's life. A Personal Reflection: The Stranger at the Gate of the House.

There was a time in our barangay when a displaced family came seeking shelter after their home was destroyed in a storm. They had no relatives nearby, just a few clothes and a child wrapped in a towel. At first, there was hesitation. "What if they bring trouble?" someone asked. "We don't know them," another said. But one family offered space. They didn't have much, but they gave what they had. That moment, to me, was Levinas in action.

The face of the Other—vulnerable, unfamiliar, even scary—called forth responsibility, not through argument, but through presence. As Still (2010) [13] and Derrida argue, hospitality is one of the most concrete expressions of ethical responsibility. Levinas challenges us to respond not because someone is like us, or because they deserve it, but because they are human.

That's difficult, especially when resources are scarce or when fear clouds our hearts. We cannot also deny the fact that nowadays, it's hard to help someone because some people fake vulnerability to scam others. But ethics, Levinas would say, begins when we go beyond ourselves. The statement "go beyond ourselves" means stepping outside of our own concerns to respond to the need of the Other. It's not about what I can gain but how I can respond to the suffering of the Other. That's the heart of Levinasian Ethics, and it's what makes philosophy both difficult and beautiful.

Criticisms and Limits: What If I Burn Out?

Of course, Levinas' philosophy isn't easy to live out. It's so idealistic in a sense. Some scholars criticize it for being too extreme. What if we give so much that we forget ourselves? What if we are taken advantage of?

These are real concerns. In fact, I've felt that too—as a teacher, as a youth leader, as a friend. There are times when you give and give and feel empty. Levinas doesn't give a clear guide for balancing self-care and responsibility, and that's a valid critique (Critchley, 1999; Perpich, 2008) [3, 11]. But I believe his point is not to exhaust ourselves blindly, but to wake us up from indifference.

We don't always need to do grand things. Sometimes it's about showing up, listening, offering what little we have. Ethics, for Levinas, is not perfection—it's proximity. Singer and Viens (2008) [12] argue that applied ethics in times of crisis should always start from the principle of care, even before policy.

Conclusion: A Call That Never Ends

Emmanuel Levinas gives us an uncomfortable, beautiful truth: we are never done being responsible. Every person we meet is a reminder that we are not the center of the world. That may feel overwhelming, but it's also deeply humanizing.

In a time when it's easy to focus on ourselves—our needs, our plans, our safety—Levinas reminds us that we are most human when we respond to the Other**.** Whether it's giving food to a hungry stranger, choosing kindness over judgment, or simply asking "Are you okay?"—each act of care is an answer to that infinite call. To live ethically, then, is to say: "Yes, I am my brother's keeper."

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