Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of ‘Other’ : An Extension of the Phenomenology of Dialogue

To the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas has always acknowledged his debt. He says that even if there is no reduction according to the rules set by Husserl, even if the whole Husserlian method is not respected, despite everything, what he is doing is phenomenology. (De Dieu qui vient a l’idée, 1982). Levinas’ phenomenology remains open to the surprises of recognizing meanings. Levinas says in one of his books: “My method is phenomenological; it consists in restoring that which is given, which bears a name, which is objective, to its background of intention, not only that intention that which is directed towards the object, but to everything which calls it to concreteness, to the horizon. I’ve often said that it is research into the staging of that which is the object; the object, which, left to itself, is clarified, as much as it closes off the gaze – as if the giving was like an eyelid which lowers itself as an object appears, and consequently as if the objective I always abstract. Concreteness is the ensemble of what is lived, of intentionality, which is not entirely heuristic; it includes the axiological and the affective. Consequently meaning is given in this concreteness, and there can be surprises here over the general role of thematization.”

Husserlian phenomenology claims that the world must always be constructed as an object of consciousness, a meaning for an ‘I’. By contrast, Levinas asks, “Isn’t there a type of experience in which something is given to me, indeed
Levinas' phenomenology allows for the possibility of recognizing what is distinctly human: “No one combated the dehumanization of the Real better than Husserl, the dehumanization which is produced when one extends the categories proper to mathematized matter to the totality of our experience, when one elevates scienticism to absolute knowledge ... Husserl’s phenomenology has furnished the principal intellectual means for substituting a human world for the world as physico-mathematical science represents it.”

To find the man as concrete, Levinas credits Husserl. As Husserl reawakened the possibility of the lived human life, Levinas is really obliged to agree with the point that human life always involves meaningfulness. Levinas says, “All consciousness is consciousness of something. Consciousness is not only the lived experience of the psychism, of the cogitations assured of their subjective existence: it is meaningfulness, thoughts casting themselves towards something that shows itself in them. For a whole generations of students and readers of the Logical Investigations, phenomenology, heralding a new atmosphere in European philosophy, meant mainly thought’s access to being, a thought stripped of subjectivists encumbrances, a return to ontology without criticists problems, without relativism’s fears ,the flowering of the eidetic sciences, the contemplation of essences, the method of the disciplines named regional ontologies.”

It is necessary to note that Levinas is recognizing the
role of intentionality as fundamental and due credit to Husserl is on record here without any fraudulence. At the same time his reading of Husserl is of special significance because it is more an interpretative reading with an attempt to reveal the inner necessity of phenomenological movement to focus on an alternative type of knowledge in which intentionality operates in a different way. It is the dialogical way and dialogue is always different from stereotyping habit of the past self and as a viewpoint too for necessitating the incorporation of the different in the other or even in the so-called object of knowledge.

Appropriately, Levinas pursues his project by discussing the work of others: of philosophers among his contemporaries who bring out and champion a thought that realizes and sustains the relation of persons to persons, the welcome we prepare for one another. This is how we contribute to human alterity. The concept of other as an alterity thus becomes a major concept in the thought of Levinas – alterity being always different from the way the self tries to stereotype the other. Philosophers of dialogue like Martin Buber set the stage for this alternative mode of thinking as new philosophy underpinning a different phenomenological trend.

To his essays concerned with these thinkers, Levinas has added two short pieces, one on the problems of the rights of man, the other on the life of language. Together, they move from the neutrality of ideas approached in their objective meaning toward their modification “in the light of the human face.” Human nature conceived in and through an abstractionist’s rational means like that of Kant, for Levinas, cannot help us in explicating the nature of communication in the real space of human relations or solve the problem of conflicting rights.
Very early Levinas was confronted with the problems of war and peace. The preservation of peace appears to him as an ethical question. Levinas decides in favour of an ethical, rigorously based "humanism of the other man". The philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger are the starting-point for Levinas. Significantly, the title of the first collection of his philosophical studies is "Discovering Being with Husserl and Heidegger". Levinas moved away increasingly from Husserl's idealism, and also from the thought which Heidegger had called "fundamental ontology". Like Buber and Bakhtin Levinas' basic thrust was philosophical anthropology or the philosophy of human nature and his basic reference-point was the other. Intentional acts of consciousness do not have any more, for Levinas, the self of the knowing subject as their reference-point. A new self emerges in the dialogical space defying any fundamental ontology; if there is any ontology it may simply refer to what Buber called relation's own being. This new self becomes equated with responsibility because it is primarily for the other and for the relational space.

Levinas' meditation starts from the assertion that today all moralities have lost creditability. There is a power that invalidates the rules of moral theory and exposes its followers to ridicule. This power is that of war. War brings to life an order that no one can escape. It seizes everyone and everything. A different kind of intentionality has been involved here which aims at something of ethical nature. In Levinas' work the two concepts viz. alterity and separation represent tools of thought by which he hopes to undermine the walls of the philosophy of reflexion, of consciousness and of idealism.
According to Levinas, ontology is a thinking that starts from the One and returns to the One. Metaphysics is based upon a movement of the human spirit that relinquishes the familiar world and undertakes the journey to unknown distances. In metaphysical sense, 'self' means self for one’s own being in which the presence or the absence of the other is underplayed. It is the reality of one’s own being that matters to everything. If one has taken power over the other realities, he is satisfied, their being-other is then canceled. A logical and ontological totality is constituted with this cancellation. But Levinas distinguishes it rigorously from metaphysical desire, which aims at something completely different. The other in the true metaphysical sense remains outside all logical and ontological totality. Thus for Levinas metaphysics must be viewed not as an abstract, idealist system, but as a real existential desire to know the reality in relation to one’s self and the self in relation to the reality.

For Husserl, the ‘other’ is in any case the ‘alien’. To describe the sense of ‘one’ and the ‘other’, Levinas views the relation as between man and God. For Levinas the self and the other must be different from each other; otherwise the other will be posited in terms of the self and self will be relationless. A self without relation is inexplicable and inaccessible. In that case the very concept of self will have no meaning and communicability in the domain of public speech. For the sake of meaning, both self and the other must retain their separation from each other to proceed for entering into a relational space. Here, a crucial question arises for Levinas that if the other is a transcendent other then how is it possible for one to have a relation with that other? First of all what kind of being is ‘I’ there, this is to be settled. An ‘I’ can identify itself solely as a result of its opposition to the ‘other’. The possibility of the self to
posses the other, i.e., to suspend the \textit{otherness} of everything is the only means to relatively sustain the mode of being the identical ‘I’.

The ‘I’ of which Levinas is speaking of is not consciousness, nor soul not even substance. Its meaning is to be constructed in the \textit{presence-absence} spectrum of the other in an infinite way. To transform the mundane beings is the main intention of the ‘I’. But there are some beings, which are not possible objects of being possessed. For Levinas, these beings are the \textit{others}. In this sense, the ‘other’ is completely alien. it is absolutely separate. This ‘other’ is not a constituted object. Now, can there be any relation between Levinas’ ‘I’ and this ‘other’? Yes, through language or we can address or talk about the other through conversation. Then this relation comes into being. Conversation pre-supposes the distance between the ‘I’ and the ‘other’ keeping both of them separate from each other. Levinas claims that the experience of the other is also an experience of the desire to break with the cycle of being in terms of the familiarity with the world: “The other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, where virtualities are inscribed in our nature and developed by our existence. Speech proceeds from absolute difference.”

Levinas understands ‘God’ as that with whom we can encounter. He denies the existence of ‘God’ as the first cause of the world. Levinas treats ‘God’ as an \textit{other}, or even \textit{other than the other}. To him, ‘God’ is the \textit{trace} of something other that disrupts the present. \textit{Trace}, for Levinas, signifies ‘beyond being’. In examining the nature of time also, Levinas wants to show that time is not a solitary experience of an individual, but a way of relating to others. Time is not a horizon of being but a mode of going beyond being, opening up to
otherness. This concept of time and its relation to the other yields direct criticisms of early Sartre's account of humans as fundamentally free and unable to communicate with the other. Levinas recognizes the paradox of positing humans as free and alone and then immediately assigning them a responsibility in conjunction with responsibility; this is a paradox, which is at the heart of Sartre's ethics. For Levinas, however, the other is not founded in freedom, but the essence of the other as alterity comes first. The whole of Levinas's philosophy can be called philosophy of alterity. Time as alterity, existence as alterity, the other person as alterity, language as alterity, and God as alterity, - these expressions point to a deeper and subtle project of Levinas to bypass thought, which confines human existence and consciousness in terms of definability and familiarity. The word alterity thus remains faithful in Levinas's use of it to its etymology, - the Latin alteritas meaning 'the state of being other or different; diversity, otherness'. The relation between human and the world is re-conceptualized on the basis of it beyond the prevalent conceptual categories of defining ability for usurping everything in the world under their fold. Human intentionality here goes beyond its pre-determined sectors based upon some usual definitions of 'knowledge', 'self', 'object', 'world' etc and gives rise to a completely new phenomenology. Alterity thus signifies infinity. The infinite, for Levinas, is everything that transcends our grasp. Levinas opposes infinity to totality. "What remains ever exterior to thought is thought in the idea of infinity" According to Levinas, infinity cannot be thought in terms of representation, because it cannot be represented: "the relation with infinity will have to be stated in terms other than those of objective experience."
To clarify his claim that ‘God’ is the ‘trace’ of something other which disrupts the present, Levinas frequently invokes the experience of Descartes, who at the heart of his *Meditations*, as a solitary meditating *cogito*, discovers God right at the center of his own most subjective thought. Levinas says that the true character of the other does not represent itself with the sense of self-identity with one experience in the ego.

Levinas’s ‘I’ is also empty in itself in the sense that it is just the signified mark of something that responds to the infinite. In Levinas’ intentionality the world not is created as *noema*. His notion of ‘I’ is completely distinct from that notion of ‘I’ in which self-consciousness affirms itself as an absolute being. In the difference between ‘self’ and ‘other’ it is a concrete person who is being responsible to stand out. It is the person in singular to whom the difference is effaced in an appearance of itself. That concrete person is called upon to answer for everyone else and himself. Now, one can have or enjoy freedom before or prior to his commitment of this responsibility to stand in the difference between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. To Levinas, existence is the absolute freedom prior to any commitment. And then one cannot become ‘itself’ but ‘not-itself’. Levinas describes this as follows: “It is the setting up of a being that is not for itself, but is for all, is both being and disinterestedness. The for-itself signifies self-consciousness; the for all, responsibilities for the others, support of the universe.... It is a being divesting itself, emptying itself of its being turning itself inside out, and if it can be put thus, the fact of ‘Otherwise than being’”.

The situation in *Modernity* does not allow to substitute the ‘self’ for the ‘Other’ rather it creates an inalienable double of the ‘self’ to which the self remains committed to the extent that both of them are ‘subjects’ to a
commonly shared normative order. Does Levinas allow this kind of constraint put on subjects in his notion of transcendence? Does he give this notion such a latitude that it makes a transcendence of the self at the cost of its limit under modernity? Perhaps Levinas does not see modernity as a process of otherisation of the subject to which the subject is compelled to owe allegiance in order to ground itself as a concrete person. Subject as an ‘other’ is no more or less than a ‘self’ under the programme of modernity; here ‘self’ cannot become the other, rather the other remains responsible to the self. The result is an alienation of self from other and there is no possibility of transcendence from such selfhood. This is evident in modernity when the self remains as an entity within institutionalized and communitarian networks of society. It no longer assumes autonomy beyond the defined precincts of community. Rather it makes itself within the community in its relationship with subjection to the other within community, which is neither the Infinite nor the God.\(^8\) This ‘other’ in the sense derived from the ethos of modernity is not the other that Levinas speaks of in the sense of alterity. Also the self of modernity is not identical with responsibility as Levinas stipulated it. Hence Levinas’s nuance of the concepts of self and other and the dialogical space between them are meant for discovering an alternative world.

Recognition of the other within a dialogical relationship is central to the discovery of this alternative world. Recognition of this kind consists in giving away of one’s own self till a new self emerges within the dialogical space as bereft of all its contents. In the same vein the other for the self is a no-thing so that the self can will freedom in the other. The other, for Levinas, is nothingness in all cases when it acquires the freedom. The relation consists in
unconditional response of self to the other. The other too makes the self ‘unconditioned’. It is the state of being without any condition.

The notion of infinity becomes meaningful within this particular relational network. Levinas says: “The Infinite in its absolute difference withholds itself from presence in me: the Infinite does not come to meet me in a contemporaneousness like that in which neither noesis and noema met together, nor in the way in which the interlocutors responding to one another may meet. The Infinite is not indifferent to me. It is in calling me to other man that transcendence concerns me. I this unique intrigue of transcendence, the non-absence of the Infinite is neither presence, nor re-presentation. Instead the idea of the Infinite is to be found in any responsibility for the Other.”

This passage speaks of two very interrelated notions, viz. (i) the nature of relation between the self and the other in terms of the non-presence and non-absence or a specific type of absence, and (ii) the intentionality of consciousness that transcends the concept of noesis-noema co-ordination in terms contemporaneousness. To proceed towards the Infinite is the fundamental motif. Here Levinas takes a stand that is even more radical than that of Buber. For Buber it is the presence of I-Thou that is central to understand the alternative concept of intentionality in terms of dialogue. For Levinas ‘presence’ also is a category that tends to profanise and fixes the other and spoils the dynamics of dialogue. However Levinas’s Infinite somehow corresponds to Buber’s concept of Eternal Thou who can never be profanised. Levinas does not locate the Eternal Thou i.e. the Infinite but traces the path towards the Infinite where there is dialogue and intentionality of consciousness without an inch of categorization of the other or the relationship. The domain or the ethos that Levinas speaks of in explicating his
notion of dialogue and dialogical intentionality can be identified as the ethos of religiousity of a specific kind. But carries its philosophical spirit further to the domains of ethics, society and a renewed version of human reality. For him transcendence of I is necessary because it is always a subject of possession and therefore unable to usher in a dialogical space of this kind leading towards the Infinite and understanding other humans and the reality. Transcendence is possible within this world but that needs a radical mutation of one's stand and awakening of the metaphysical desire to discover the world dialogically through the discovery of the other as Infinite.

How come there be any relation between the I and the Other that's Infinite? It comes about when the I encounters the other as alterity. In it the two elements are united, in it the metaphysical desire finds a concrete expression. To Levinas, “The transcendence of the countenance does not take place outside the world”. In fact no relation among men can be initiated outside the economy. In ethical respect one cannot approach a countenance with empty hands and with locked doors. Everything in this world takes place between us. It concerns everyone. Everything takes place in the light of the public order. No one can draw back from it. Levinas represents this way: “language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient “I-Thou” forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter and cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice. It is not that there first would be the face, then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger; but this poverty and
exile which appeal to my powers, address me, do not deliver themselves over to these powers as givens, remain the expression of the face.”

For Levinas to be I is to exist, to enjoy and not to use or aspire or represent something. It is the multiplicity, which allows the I to be visible from the outside. To make the relationship stronger with the other, the relation must proceed from I to the other. There, as Levinas holds, “the individuals would appear as participants in the totality; the Other would amount to a second copy of ‘I’.” Whatever may be the relation, it may be of love or hatred, be obedience or command, be it learning or teaching, a pluralism in itself must be realized, an altitude of an I with regard to the Other. It means the movement from ‘I’ to the ‘other’ cannot retain the centrality of the ‘I’. The alterity of ‘other’ reveals itself. The ‘other’ cannot be included within a network of relations visible to a third party. ‘I’’s status is concept less individual. It would disappear when it would participate in the relation between ‘I’ and the ‘other’. There it represents itself as nothing but the ‘self’, which multiply itself with the ‘other’. In Levinas’ words: “I have access to it proceeding from myself and not through a comparison of myself with the other. I have access to the alterity of the Other from the society I maintain with him, and by quitting this relation in order to reflect on its terms. Sexuality supplies the example of this relation, accomplished before being reflected on: the sex is an alterity borne by a being as an essence and not as the reverse of his identity; but it could not affect an unsexed me. The Other as master can also serve us an example of an alterity that is not only by relation to me, an alterity that, belonging to the essence of the other, is nevertheless visible only from an I.”

This enjoyment leaves an added characteristic for the ‘I’ – the characteristic which was not present before the realization of dependence of self on other in
sexual intentionality. Rather we can say that it is the need of or the
dependence on the ‘other’. The distance intercalated between man and the
world on which he depends constitutes the essence of need. To conceive of
need is to apprehend it in the midst of a society. A need in fact is a relation
with the other yielding the other’s alterity for the self.

Enjoyment is withdrawal into oneself. The ‘I’ is not the support of enjoyment.
The support is the need, that is to say, the relation. When the ‘I’ is identified
with the reason, it loses its very identity. But the joy of this intellectual
coincidence and the freedom of this obedience mark a cleavage line in the
unity on this way. Reason makes human society possible. When the ‘I’
establishes its relation with the ‘other’, or with the society, it returns to itself
as an ‘other’ of the ‘other’. It can never be as it was before this relationship. It
becomes an inalienable other. In Levinas’ words: “The subject as a hostage
has been neither the experience nor the proof of the Infinite, but a witness
borne of the Infinite, a modality of this glory, a testimony that no disclosure
has preceded.”

It is the enjoyment or need that invokes ‘I’ to encounter with the ‘other’, this
we have clarified earlier. And for Levinas, no phenomenology can reduce the
non-intentional consciousness of the ‘I’ to an identity of being. In Levinas’
language, the subjectivity of subject is responsibility of being-in-question and
the subjectivity of this non-intentional mode of ‘I’ amounts to a cogitation not
comprehending the cogitatum, which affects it utterly. The experience of
transcendence breaks off the repression of responsibility into the un-conscious
‘I’ that is engendered by silencing the call of the Infinite. Instead,
transcendence turns the ‘I’ responsible for the very prosecution that it suffers in the process of affirming its Ego-self. The responsibility of encountering with the ‘other’ affirms the ‘I’ without any ‘ego’.

Now our main aim concern is to mark ‘I’ as the movement of experience within live human consciousness because the ‘I’ here cannot be indifferent to the ‘other’. The phenomenologists have said that if the relation is made by ‘saying’ it is noesis and if it is predicated, it is noema. When is ‘I’ is put before the ‘other’ it indicates that ‘I’ is speaking to someone ‘other’. Saying of course is comminuting with others. That ‘I’ is speaking means it is communicating with the ‘other’. But Levinas is saying that ‘saying’ & to be predicated or to be said is not simply is like that of noesis or noema. It is the task of philosopher in this situation to lead back what is said to the ‘saying’, to the expressive turn towards the Other. Levinas calls this leading back reduction. ‘I’’s innermost being is now outside, since it exists for the ‘other’. Levinas’ responsibility for the other merely makes it possible that the excluded ‘other’ be drawn near the purview of subjectivity by emptying itself out, without a halt to the process of otherisation. The sheer helplessness of modern man to confront its otherness remains to be a source of ‘repression of the social’. According to Levinas the ‘other’ does not live in the ‘I’, this ‘I’ remain concealed in the process of otherisation. When this ‘I’ intimates something to the ‘other’, it turns to the ‘other’. The word ‘I’ means, “I assume the responsibility for everything and everyone.”

In sum, it is the relation between self and the other that constitutes the essence of intentionality of consciousness. The very subject or self is in a continuous movement to the non-presence of the other and the non-categorized form of the other. A more radical view of dialogue than that of Martin Buber follows
from this standpoint, - dialogue that is neither in presence nor in absence. Presence and absence are fleeting experiences leading towards a deeper of experience of being in dialogue with the Infinite. Intentional acts of consciousness do not have the support of, nor do they hinge on a self that is outside of this progressive movement towards the Infinite; the support or the source of intentionality is to be conceived within dialogicality in this specific sense.
Notes and References:


2. Ibid. p-327


5. Ibid, p-25;xiii

6. Ibid, p-25;xiii


8. Biswas Prasenjit, , Emmanuel Levinas’ Concept of ‘Other’ : A Critical Reading Through the Lens of Transcendence in *Existence, Experience and Ethics Essays for S.A. Saida*, ed, A. Raghuramaraju, p-351


13. Ibid. p-85.