

Levinas's Responsibility Ethics: A Reinforcement to the Ethics of Professional Teaching in Nigerian Schools (Universities)

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Abstract: The notion ethics exists in human societies as it is in all professions. Being the mother of all professions, professional ethics for teachers becomes uncompromisingly important. The essay seeks to reinforce the teachers' ethical code with the Levinasian ethics of responsibility that prescribes absolute, unconditional, infinite and asymmetrical care for the Other. The author introduces Levinas's ethics, draws its implications to academics and applies it to Nigerian universities in particular and claims that it complements and reinforces the teachers' ethics. To drive this point home, the author parses the Levinasian subject as the teacher and the Other as the student. The student is an absolute Other that is absolved from any sort of unethical intercourse with the teacher. The destitution, vulnerability and fragility of the student begs the teacher to teach and be a role model to him. The author uses the notion of fecundity which represents engendering of good actions that endures infinitely to strengthen the teachers' ethics. The dual perspectives of fecundity explain abstract paternity and role modelling. The author argues this metaphor can strengthen the Nigerian teaching profession for, the teacher fathers his student as a father fathers his son as well as serving a role model for him. These two roles amount to generating goodness to the pure future. A well-groomed student transcends the teacher. As a son immortalizes the father, the student immortalizes the teacher and perpetuates the teaching profession in its integrity.

Key words: Ethics, responsibility, asymmetrical, absolute, fecundity, paternity, role-model

1. Introduction

Levinas's ethics recommends responsibility for the Other by the subject [In Levinas's ethics of responsibility, the Other is the beneficiary of care and the subject or the I is the one that offers the responsibility. In this essay, the subject is the teacher while the Other is the student. Levinas uses capital "O" to distinguish the human Others from non-human others. This will be explained more in the next section]. This ethics can reinforce the teaching professional ethics in the Nigerian educational institutions. Education which is a complex of variables is the superstructure of all successful nations of the world. The variables must function harmoniously for the success of the education system. This essay focuses on teaching profession because teachers foremostly drive and mediate between knowledge and the students. The importance of teachers, person, role and the ethics of the profession has brought them under the searchlight of this essay. Consequently, while the essay acknowledges the teaching professional ethics, it also argues that the ethics of responsibility will strengthen the professional ethics because of the structure and the narrative of care it defends. Additionally, the role of the "subject" (teacher) as one who is available to answer everyone for everything absolutely, infinitely, unconditionally and asymmetrically complements and reinforces the teaching professional ethics. Furthermore, Levinas's notion of fecundity in its dual perspectives: abstract paternity and role model that engenders goodness, introduces a novel outlook to teacher – student relationship. Evidently, this model ensures that students will immortalize teachers and the teaching profession.

This essay proceeds as follows: Firstly, it introduces Levinas's ethics to create acquaintance with the notion of responsibility which defends the Other- the student. Secondly, it investigates the implications of the ethics of responsibility for academics. It argues that the ethics arrogates a primordial role on teachers, as fathers and models and therefore, must live up to these. Thirdly, it applies the implications of this ethics to Nigerian university and argues that the change of narrative in the teacher-student relationship will ennoble the profession

and constantly rejuvenates it. Lastly, it concludes that successful students are the transcendence and trans-substantiation which is the goal of paternity and role model is possible if teachers live up to their professional roles.

2. Introducing Levinas's Ethics

Levinas's ethics of responsibility is an ethics of care. It recommends absolute, infinite, unconditional and non-reciprocal responsibility for the Other. This prescription forms a major ethical theme in his major philosophical works (Levinas, *Totality* 215; Levinas, *Otherwise* 55). Levinas further emphasizes the gravity of responsibility as a non-reciprocal relationship (Levinas, *Ethics* 98). This ethics of care mirrors two postulated unequal personae: The subject also called (the 'I') and the Other. The subject takes the initiative, responds and cares for the Other. Levinas presents and represents the 'I' with a hyperbolic imagery and defines him as availability, readiness and sufficiency to answer everyone at all times (Levinas, *Otherwise* 114). The Levinasian 'I' is a moral subject whose answerability is activated at the epiphany of the Other. The Other is presented in opposition to the 'I' because he represents destitution, vulnerability, wretchedness etc. Despite his destitution, he is an absolute Other that resists absorption and where amalgamated, resists plurality (Levinas, *Totality* 39). His absolute Otherness allows him to enter into a relationship and remains unassimilated. To this Other, the 'I' must respond infinitely, absolutely, unconditionally and asymmetrically. The nature of the response is predicated on the fact that unlike human needs that can be satisfied; the radical human desire can never be satiated. By postulating infinite, absolute, unconditional and non-symmetrical response to the Other, Levinas is offering the Other the best resources to improve his condition. Another important variable in the Levinasian ethics is the 'notion of the face as nudity'. The face in Levinas's ethics gratifies metaphorical reading because its literal reading misrepresents and misleads. The face does not mean the looks or shape or the contours etc., but a symbol that represents the brokenness, destitution and the weakness of the Other. The face of the Other represents his living presence and lived condition (Levinas, *Totality* 66). A face that discloses itself begs assistance and he is at the mercies of the 'I'. The face remains unknown until it discloses itself to the subject.

The epiphany of the face of the Other is the beginning of ethics (Levinas, *Totality* 199) This makes physical contact important for, there is no relationship in this ethics without a concrete phenomenological appearance. Therefore, Levinas claims that ethical relationship begins from the face-to-face encounter of the subject and the Other (Levinas, *Totality* 203) where the Other is an absolute and cannot be assimilated into the subject. This absolute construct is a defense of the Other for which he argues that the subject should prioritize the Other because relationship with the Other is primordial and prior to the subject's relationship with himself, "the relationship with the non – ego, precedes any relationship of the ego with itself" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 119). This argument calls to question all negligence, indifference and deafness to the welfare of the Other as well as justifies the conception of the responsibility he prescribes in favor of the Other. For instance, Levinas justifies feeding the Other with the bread from one's mouth and clothing him with the coat from one's arms (Levinas, *Otherwise* 55). Responsibility for the Other is so important to Levinas that he postulates that the subject could assume himself obsessed to the point of substituting himself for the Other's very responsibility and making himself a hostage for the Other (Levinas, *Ethics* 100). This obsession compels the subject to respond to the Other himself as if he is the Other's last option (Levinas, *Ethics* 100). The 'I' must respond to the Other by himself without deterrence despite pains and discomforts. Levinas justifies such inconveniences in favor of the Other as ethical "the exposure to another is disinterestedness, proximity, obsession by the neighbor an obsession despite oneself, that is, a pain" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 55). Though he acknowledges the challenges of this hyperbolic conception, but he endorses them as ethical and the crux of the morality of responsibility.

There is also a prohibitory side of this ethics. It is the construction of the face as "nudity and poverty" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 89), vulnerable and needing help and protection (Levinas, *Totality*

275). By these constructs, Levinas prohibits everything that is opposed to the care and welfare of the Other. It is assumed that these descriptions and hypothetical assumptions are to favor of his ethics of responsibility for every Other cannot always fit into them. Therefore, by so doing, Levinas draws the attention of all subjects to the fragility of the Other as a reason to offer help and to avoid violence. In his ethics, the apex of violence is murder which he specifically denounces, "murder already resists us in his face, in his face is the primordial expression, 'you shall not commit murder'" (Levinas, *Totality* 199). This prohibition, which is universal asserts and upholds its opposite virtue, responsibility and he declares that "the face orders and ordains me [for responsibility]" (Levinas, *Ethics* 97). Still on the prohibition, elsewhere, Levinas vouches that the otherness of the Other is the highest expression of the imperative "thou shalt not kill" (Levinas, *Time* 109; Levinas, *Ethics* 87). Since the face of the Other resists murder, murder, means assuming power on that which resists it (Levinas, *Totality* 198). Therefore, murder is antithetical and a contradiction to responsibility and the zenith of irresponsibility. Levinas's ethics is an attempt to investigate the conditions for ethical determination and to call to question man's inhumanity to the Other. He calls this ethics, first philosophy because it prioritizes human life and wellbeing unlike ontology that focuses on nature (Levinas, *Totality* 46). His ethics reverses the primary focus of philosophy from ontology, Metaphysics, or theology to humanity and so prioritizes the concrete man - the Other.

Levinas's ethics represents a novel and a radical reversal of the preoccupation of philosophy from its concerns about nature to that of the concrete human being; where in an inassimilable relationship between the I and the Other, care for the Other comes first before that of the self. Some commentators for e.g. Llewelyn have alleged that Levinas's ethics could be read as a reaction to the totalizing nature of the Western philosophical tradition. He points out that Levinas's philosophy engages the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger from a different perspective (250). Levinas himself could be understood as engaging in a deconstruction of Heideggerian ontology that prioritized nature over human welfare (Levinas, *Totality* 33). Furthermore, Levinas's ethics of responsibility unfolds an asymmetry between two postulated persons, the I and the Other in which the Other that approaches the I from the dimension of the height (Levinas, *Totality* 34). The "height" designates the circumstantial/situational differences between the I and the Other. It is this asymmetry that makes Levinasian ethics non-reciprocal. For the Other is incapable of any reciprocal gestures. On this, Levinas argues that the asymmetrical responsibility defines subject - Other relationship: The intersubjective relation is asymmetrical relation and upon it hangs the ethical. This asymmetry has immense implications for the teaching profession for teachers and students, but the notion of fecundity shall be a complement.

3. Implications of Levinas's Ethics for Academics

The crux of Levinas's ethics of responsibility can be highlighted as the prescription of care and the prohibition of violence. This ethics features the caregiver (I/ subject) and the beneficiary (Other) and begins with the encounter of the faces of the subject and the Other. The face of the Other is a symbolic representation of the whole person of the Other of weakness, destitution and always needing help. This characterization establishes a divide that shows in the "height" and asymmetry. The height explains all the differences of the Other that approaches the 'I'. The asymmetry also expresses same but informs the 'I' on how the Other should be perceived and treated. It could be surmised that whereas the "height" is objective and explains the circumstantial difference of the Other that approaches the 'I', the asymmetry is subjective but asserts the capacity of subject as well as informs him that caring for Other is his onus. The subject-Other characterizes the teacher - student relationships in the academic institutions. This We analysis follows from the perspective of Levinas's notion of fecundity as a complement.

Fecundity is a metaphor that entails generating goodness that endures infinitely. It also represents living good life, being good and perpetuating goodness, being "good beyond being" (Levinas, *Existence* xxvii). It also implies good deeds that have future relation. He defines

fecundity as “engendering fecundity accomplishes goodness ... the conception of the child” (Levinas, *Totality* 269). This notion is equivocal and connotes metaphorical understanding. Firstly, as a metaphor, it refers to abstract biological procreation or abstract paternity and secondly, it explains non-biological description of the existence that accomplishes acts of goodness. *Totality and Infinity* discusses these two interpretations the first of which is abstract biological terminology that parallels procreation. In this sense, fecundity refers to procreation and transcendence in which the son immortalizes the father. Levinas describes this point of view as accomplishing transcendence to the pure future which is a time that is always to come. This notion, Levinas abstractly identifies with paternity (*Totality* 247).

Secondly, fecundity, also understood in a non-biological sense, connotes the generation and transfer of goodness from the present to the infinite future. He claims that “philosophy itself constitutes a moment [in fecundity] temporal accomplishment, a discourse always addressed to another” (*Totality* 269). For instance, the services of schoolteachers are fecund roles. These supervisors play fecund role because it transfers goodness from the present to the future.

The abstract biological concept of fecundity is significant to academics. The teacher is an abstract parent whose role includes above all parenting the students. In doing so teachers must teach with such a passion and goal that the students learn not only for examination purposes but also for daily life. A good teacher is a role model to the students even though the students embrace different professions, the dedication and enthusiasm of the teacher will inspire them in their respective professions. In our context, the teacher is the subject while the student is the Other. The teacher-student union explains abstract paternity that fulfills the promise of the future i.e., the adopted child. This metaphor of procreation involves a teacher-student encounter which constitutes a project accomplished in the abstract biological sense of fecundity (Levinas, *Totality* 267). The child creates the role of paternity in which the child is the product of the father. The child is not a property of the father like his car or his house but a special unique gift among the other possessions - his transcendence. The child's relationship with the father is that of fecundity, which is neither political nor religious or social: “The child-father relationship is friendly, without force, but it guarantees posterity in infinity (Levinas, *Totality* 268). The significance of the father-child relationship is the father's immortalization.

This peculiar relationship between the father and the child creates a moral role between them for, the father commands and the son obeys. This role explains responsibility which represents the reason for human creation. From its moral role, Levinas's concept of fecundity in abstract biological perspective applies to the teacher-student relationship. For when the teacher joins the totality of history, the student who is his, “trans-substantiation” transcends him. Therefore, through “trans-substantiation,” the teacher creates a future relation for himself via the student. Fecundity constantly rejuvenates the teacher in his student. The student represents infinite time, and therefore, the teacher remains ever youthful in his student (Levinas, *Totality* 268). This accords Levinas's metaphor of fecundity multi-phenomenological and existential relevance not only in philosophy, but in concrete situations of life.

The non-biological sense of fecundity is the goodness that occurs in time through human agency. Levinas writes that “the “*personality*” of a being is its very need for time as for a miraculous fecundity in the instant itself, by which it recommences as other” (Levinas, *Existence* 95). The above is a reference to the time needed for generating and transmitting goodness to posterity. The metaphor of fecundity does not express biological embodiment, though it could also be understood from that perspective in so far as deeds of goodness are accomplished through human agency, such acts are fecund roles. Therefore, roles such as professorship or writers, or better still, a human rights activism or philanthropism are fecund roles, and the agents are parents because they engender goodness that impacts on mankind and which relates to the future and endure through time.

However, there is tension in the two modes of paternity that the notion of fecundity offers. One might ask how a teacher is to treat his biological child, and his student, a non-biological child. Is it possible to treat these two in the same way? I think that it is not possible to cast these two instances in the same light because the two are from different biological origins. However, since the two characterizations emphasize goodness, what is good for the biological child is also good for the academic child. Therefore, Levinas's notion on fecundity is a compelling model that rekindles hope for a better relationship between teachers and students in the academia. Derrida captures these sentiments well when he characterizes Levinas's work as ethics of ethics: "let us not forget that Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine a morality, but rather the essence of ethical relation in general. But as this determination does not offer itself as a theory of Ethics, in question then is an Ethics of Ethics" (Derrida, 138). This projects the uniqueness and novelty of Levinas's thought as investigating ethical determination in our human relationships: the conditions that make it possible for people to find meaning in performing good actions that contribute to a good life for others in the society. The above analysis offers us the significance of fecundity which can be evaluated in the end-time judgment.

The future relation introduces us to time to which Levinas refers as that which accomplishes a renewing effect on the subject. Time is inextricable from existence for, "to be infinitely--infinite - means to exist without limit" (Levinas, *Totality* 281). This definition is important for the two characterizations of fecundity because it underscores the duration between teaching, its results, practice of profession and judgment in history by posterity.

The notion of eschatology and judgment concludes the metaphor of fecundity. Eschatology is not to be understood as historicity or historical, but rather as a judgment that brings people out of the totality of history to their individuality in order to evaluate their actions. Eschatology is a dual moment that creates opposition between morality and immorality, the ethical and the unethical, the good and the bad. Therefore, the passion, dedication and sagacity of good teachers are in opposition to vices and the indolence of the others. It is a moment of judgment and truth.

Furthermore, judgment is the instance when individuals are spoken of and which their deeds are revealed and evaluated by others. Levinas queries: "does not judgment the act of situating by reference to infinity, necessarily have its source outside the being judged; does it not come from the other, from history?" (Levinas, *Totality* 240). This query has two implications for teaching profession: (a) That teachers will be judged for their professional relationship with their students; and (b) That history will witness to their deeds. Levinas places human responsibility as well as judgments on the individual level. For this reason teachers cannot escape the consequences of their professional life. For, the temporal judgment of history is an Other to the individual, and history is detrimental to the human will because it alienates the will (Levinas, *Totality* 240-1). Judgment by history is mediated and is imperfect because it is based on human evaluation. Thus, Levinas claims that the alternative and supreme judgment by God is not only fair, but also comprehensive and excellent.

Judgment by God is different from and preferred to judgment by history because God probes all our deeds for, God is omniscient and omnipresent, yet invisible. Levinas extols the omnipotence and the omniscience of God by maintaining that "the idea of a judgment of God represents the limit idea of a judgment that, on the one hand, takes into account the invisible and essential offense to a singularity that results from judgment ...God sees the invisible and sees without being seen" (Levinas, *Totality* 244). The appeal to judgment reiterates and consolidates Levinasian construction of ethics. This ethics offers plausible reasons for teachers to strive to uphold their profession and live ethically in relation to their academic children.

4 Implications of Levinas's Ethics for the Nigerian University Lecturers

The previous sections attempted a sketchy resume of Levinas's ethics of responsibility and its implications on academics, respectively. In a nutshell, the responsibility ethics applied to the universities is an ethics of care. It focused on the role of lecturers in their professional relationship with the students Other. This section will be applied to investigate its implications for the Nigerian university lecturers. The University is the tertiary institution of learning whereby academic activities are aimed at better learning and professionalism. A complex of corporative actions are needed from the government, the society, the family, the teachers and the student for the realization of this noble objective but this essay focuses on the professionalism of the teachers because they play a central and mediating role between knowledge and the learners. For the unique reason that the teacher does not only teach but also plays a modelling role for his students, his professional personality is at all times a *sine qua non* for the integral formation and development of the learners.

A brief recap of Levinas's ethics of responsibility is helpful: It recommends that the lecturer cares for the student absolutely, infinitely, unconditionally and asymmetrically. Worthy of note, it is that Levinas's recommendation of responsibility is regardless of the merit of subject, but what neither concerns the subject or matter to him (Levinas, Ethics 95). If so, an open-ended question here is what would be Levinas's expectation of the Nigerian university lecturers in relation to his ethical prescription? Furthermore, in his notion of fecundity, Levinas postulates two perspectives of generating and perpetuating goodness beyond being to the pure future: Firstly, abstract biological or concrete biological (Levinas, Totality 267). In this sense, a lecturer can beget a child abstractly as an academic child. Secondly, in the non-biological sense, any good professionalism even philosophy is a moment of accomplishing goodness (Levinas, Totality 269). In this perspective, the teacher can be a model. Our arguments, appraisal and recommendations of fecundity will follow this logic.

In keeping with the Levinasian postulation, the face of the student is a face in need of knowledge. As ethical relationship begins at the epiphany of the face, so does learning process commences at the appearance of the teacher in the learning environments. The implication of this is that the "face" of every student begs the teacher for knowledge of which he is considered a repository. The "destitution" of the student's face represents the student's need of knowledge; hence, his vulnerability and fragility can only be satisfied by the teacher. For this reason, to recognize the deploring condition of the students is to recognize his need of knowledge and to teach him (Levinas, Totality 75). The subject – the teacher should feed the student with the bread from his mouth and clothe him with the coat from his shoulders (Levinas, Otherwise 55). The latter assumption points to the compelling passion and commitment a teacher should have for his role. It could be thought to mean that no circumstance of the teacher justifies the neglect of his duty, - to talk less about a willful neglect of duty. This agrees with the absolute care which Levinasian ethics prescribes. Infinity also defines his ethics as well.

Knowledge is a continuum. Levinas acknowledges this in relation to his notion of infinite responsibility. He uses "metaphysical desire" to explain the insatiable nature of knowledge, and argues that unlike elemental things which can be satisfied, goodness as well as knowledge can be deepened but never can be satisfied "It is like goodness- the Desire does not fulfill it, but deepens it"(Levinas, Totality 34). We can understand this claim from two point of views. Firstly, knowledge is infinite which coheres with our opening assumption that the students can never learn enough or learn all but can deepen what they learn. Secondly, neither can the teacher teach all. Does this claim absolve the teacher from his professional duty? Does this claim equiparate the teacher and the student? "No" answers the two questions. Though infinity answers the extent to learning, the teacher must exercise his professionalism beyond responsibility. If Levinas's responsibility draws the attention of a subject to matters that do not concern him, what possibly is his message to Nigerian teachers on their duty posts? Asymmetry also defines the teacher's responsibility.

Asymmetry and height are two faces of the same coin. Asymmetry is the subjective side that references the teacher and height is the objective side that refers to the student. "Height" designates the difference between the teacher and the student. The Other approaches me from the dimension of the height, spells teacher-student asymmetry (Levinas, *Totality* 75). This difference of role focuses on the teacher because the teacher has the role of teaching. The asymmetry does not invest the teacher with power to hypothetically exploit the student for "over him I have no power" (Levinas, *Totality* 39). The ethical relation involved in the teacher-student asymmetry is the professional role - teaching. The absolute Otherness of the students absolves them from all unprofessional intercourse. The teacher exercises his profession altruistically and readily which fits into the definition of the subject that is appropriate to his professional role: "I am, answering for everything and for everyone" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 114). The conceptual notion of responsibility ethics climaxed in the dimension of "height" and is complemented by the two perspectives of the notion of fecundity.

The abstract biological notion of fecundity creates a possibility for a child as the transcendence. The teacher plays the role of the fathers whereas the student, the child. In this sense the professionalism of the teacher and the discharge of his duties are of utmost importance. For, as a father, he knows that the child will succeed him and perpetuate him when is no more so do teachers. This is the importance of the student to the teacher therefore, he nurtures, provides for him. The student is a product of the teacher, but yet an Other to the teacher. This seeming contradiction underlies the ethical role of the teacher on behalf of the child. The failure of professional teachers in this ethical role results in absence of transcendence and hence, the dearth of professional teachers in the future. In the ethical relation, the student has the duty to obey and to be willing in following the directives of the teacher as we noted earlier. However, the primary attention is for teachers to be ethical in every relationship with the student. The teacher creates a future for teaching profession for the society by training the student. The infinite time of fecundity constantly rejuvenates the teacher through the student because the student represents the infinity. This notion is described by Levinas as trans-substantiation (Levinas, *Totality* 269). The non-biological perspective is a complement.

The non-biological perspective of fecundity represents a human agent generating goodness that lasts infinitely. When the teacher generates good actions, he also creates himself as a model for the students. There are many professions in life that immortalize themselves through modelling. This is to say that these professionals make themselves models to young stars unbeknownst to them. By being models to others, they play fecund roles, but the mother of all professions is the teaching profession. It is for this reason that Levinas claims that philosophy itself is a dynamic and a moment of fecundity because it is a discourse directing to students (*Totality* 247). A perfect expression of this is when a lecturer teaches, supervises academic works, examines and evaluates the students. All these services of the teacher are fecundating, generating goodness and immortalizing the profession. Teachers must understand that their professional role is important mirror that reflects the students on the teachers, this makes the discharge of the role equally important. Therefore, teachers must mold the students into products of theirs because it is good students that can immortalize the teachers and the profession.

5. Conclusion

Levinas's ethics of responsibility is an ethics of care. The usefulness of Levinas's ethics is that its application can reinforce and offer a novel vista to teaching profession in the Nigerian university. This claim is presupposed on the intuition, illustrations and the plausibility of the arguments of responsibility ethics - defense of the Other. This is not however to undermine the specific rationale for the ethics of the teaching profession. Specifically, it recognizes the teacher as prime facilitator of knowledge and this role makes a lot of demand on him

(Durosaro). Ethics of care implies that the role of the teacher is within and outside the classroom, curricular and extracurricular activities. To bear out this demand, the ethics of responsibility is crucial, and its proposals are inevitable. The teacher – student dichotomy in its entailments is important and must be upheld. When the teacher is cognizant of the range of his professional relationship with the student and garnishes it with the care ethics, his foremost inclination is to exercise his role. The image of the student he sees is vulnerability, fragility, destitution which implies his need for knowledge and not unprofessional intercourses. Despite this need, the teacher must understand that the student is an absolute Other that must not be assimilated. Assimilation explains taking undue and unethical advantages of any kind of the student. If this is avoided, then the notion of fecundity in its double-speak perspectives is certain to take its course: the teacher fathers the student who would immortalize him and the profession as well as generates goodness by being a model to the student. The student transcends the teacher and the profession. This transcendence is transubstantiation. Viewed in this way, responsibility ethics reinforces teaching professionalism and offers a model for Nigerian universities.

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