

Thoughts from Levinas:

Responsibility, Interest, and Leadership within Further and Higher Education in Malta

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Emmanuel Levinas (1906 – 1995)

- French-Lithuanian Jewish philosopher
- Existentialism, phenomenology, and the relation of **ethics** to metaphysics and ontology
- French soldier during WWII, captured as a prisoner of war, and consigned to the Fallingbommel Camp near Hanover
- Went on to write and publish hugely influential books and essay collections that have influenced the whole of continental philosophy and beyond



Ethics as First Philosophy

- The Self – who we are – is always defined by the Other – our family, neighbours, strangers, institutions, societies, cultures.
- As such, it is not the case that we define the Other, but that the Other defines us. We are not surrounded; we are created.
- Totality and Infinity; Self-Containment and Openness; Tyranny and Responsibility.
 - “I do not have my child. [...]. I *am* in some way my child” (*Time and the Other*, 91)

Ethics as First Philosophy, cont.

- The Other bears one command: “thou shalt not kill” (*Ethics and Infinity*, 89)
- In short, **ethics** is what I become in relation to others, and **who we are** is thoroughly infused by our ethical responsibility to not commit violence.
- This is why, for Levinas, freedom is a ‘difficult freedom’, at core social, responsible, ethical.
- The forms of violence on the vulnerable Other; moving away from reducing all meaning and power to the Self.

Ethics and Responsibility

- The relation between myself and the Other is one of response, which Levinas allows us to formulate as “**response-ability**”; our ability to respond is the fundamental basis from which we can act responsibly (or not).
- Levinasian ethics as dialogue; to be responsible is to listen.
- Encountering the Other ‘means that I do not resort only to what is easy – what I already know, or what we have in common. It means that I listen for and make space for the difficult, the different, the radically strange’ (Lipari, ‘Listening for the Other’, 138)

Ethics and Responsibility, cont.

- To be ethically responsible is to allow ourselves to respond, and not, for instance, to rely solely on SOPs, stipulations, or categorisations to do our thinking for us.
- “Just Following Orders” (Eichmann and the Nuremberg Trials; Hannah Arendt and *The Banality of Evil*, 1963)
 - Can one *do* evil without *being* evil? As dangerous as it may be to think, is it more dangerous not to think?
- “Basically we are always educating for a world that is or is becoming out of joint, for this is the basic human situation, in which the world is created by mortal hands to serve mortals for a limited time as home” (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 192).

Ethics and Interest

- Expressing interest: moving away from the totalitarian categorisation of 'stakeholder' and towards stakeholder multiplicity, an infinity
- Accruing interest: "Whatever the variety of functions that money exerts in the multiple conjectures of economic order [...], money – mediation *par excellence* – [is] less the act of possession than the possibility or ability to take possession' ('Sociality and Money', 203)
- Therefore, money *is* social interaction – the possibility of responsible or irresponsible response; "In money, one can never forget this *interhuman* proximity [...] and sociality that already runs through it from one to one, from stranger to stranger, the *trans-action* from which all money proceeds"

Ethics and Interest, cont.

- Keeping in mind the etymology: *inter-* (between) and *esse* (being); interest is the very backbone of how one person relates to another, the exchange between humans.
- Interest as financial, interest in the financial: where man “values himself in money at the price of his *doing* and his know-how. Integration of man into the economic system, his market value with respect to different enumerations of economic development”, where “acts are measured in the homogeneity immanent to money” (“Sociality and Money”, 205-6).
- Disallowing money from totalising others into profit margins; allowing others to be more than their money’s worth, to value even when there is no immediate value in doing so.

Ethics and Leadership

- ‘Ethics is located in the heart of leadership’ (Ciulla, ‘Leadership Ethics: Mapping the Territory’, 6)
- Growing academic and pedagogical interest in ethical leadership: Leadership as responsibility to Others; Leadership as Interest in Others
- Leadership as ‘a social-relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in [the] social process of *interaction*’ (Maak and Pless, ‘Responsible Leadership in a Stakeholder Society’, 9)

Ethics and Leadership, cont.

- Responsible leaders 'are tasked with differentiating between things that can be managed and living beings who deserve respect and dignity' (Jones, *Leadership Lessons from Levinas*, 52)
- 'If leaders truly face the stakeholders who are before them, they will be able to respond more responsibly. Leaders need to have real encounters with stakeholder Others, rather than perceiving them as abstract entities of a singular category' (Jones, 55).
- Transitioning from Heads of Institution to Leaders of Institution

Accountability: the combination of Responsibility, Interest, Leadership

- To be accountable; to count and account; to present an account;
- Not envisioning a future or creating a desired strategy; instead, responding differently to the present;
- Understanding how we all tend towards totalitarianism, and allowing alterity to interrupt and break its self-containment – the act of putting ourselves into question, keeping ourselves open, the act of difficult freedom;
- Making ourselves accountable (responsible, interested, leaders).

MFHEA: Compliance Unit

- Aims: to open and maintain channels of communication between the regulator (MFHEA) and further/higher educational providers – in sum, to foster and protect the culture of accountability.
- The development of an ethical culture vs codifying corporate regulations of ethical behaviour
- Online Reviews, General Non-Compliance, Spot Checks
- ‘Business often engenders what many would say is utterly opposed to ethics with frequent scandal, employee exploitation, and environmental degradation; but this is precisely the reason Levinas’s philosophy is so greatly needed. Beyond scandal and misconduct by leaders, Levinas would view daily operating procedures of typical administrative practice as totalitization’ (Jones, 52)

MFHEA: Compliance Unit: Some Examples

- RESPONSIBILITY

- IQAs and ethics code (when present) written by others and not incorporated in the running of the institution
- Educational shortcuts (RPL, hours, assessments, and validation)
- Lagging self-creation in terms of professional development and professional listening
- No refunds! – policy over person

- INTEREST

- Paying one's way (visa breaches and gateway institutions)
- Turning persons into “students” – the dangers of categorisation and the realities of human trafficking
- Fragmenting the Other: admin, registration, and processing fees; poaching, fraud, and (ruthless) competition
- Staff development and CPD; student fees and staff payments
- Lack of accessibility for persons with physical disability and lack of preparation for those with learning difficulties – listening to the Other without the need for speech

- LEADERSHIP

- Minute taking & strategic and budgetary planning – enabling a culture of leaders by letting future individuals be responsible
- Liaison and transparency with the Authority; clarity and accuracy of marketing and media
- Not remaining open to difficulties and interruptions: EU standards, pedagogical best practices (e.g. peer observation, feedback to students), sharing of wealth
- The filing of student feedback

Concluding Thought

Mistakes and how to account for them

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