LEVINAS' ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY AND THE IDEA OF THE FACE: AN EVALUATION OF ALAIN BADIOU'S CRITICISMS

Mostofa Nazmul Mansur

ABSTRACT: This paper examines Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of responsibility, grounded in his concepts of Otherness and the face-to-face relation, and compares it with Alain Badiou's critique and alternative ethical vision. For Levinas, ethics does not arise from universal principles or intentional consciousness, but from the asymmetrical demand of the Other—whose face calls us to an infinite responsibility that comes before thought or choice. The ethical subject (the Same) is not autonomous, but is summoned into responsibility by the undeniable presence of the Other's vulnerability. Badiou, however, challenges this view. He sees Levinas' ethics as overly focused on passive victimhood and as lacking engagement with historical truth and action. For Badiou, ethics comes not from compassion but from fidelity to truth-events—disruptive acts that break with the existing order and call for active participation in creating change. In his view, the ethical Same becomes a subject of history by doing good through commitment to truth, not by simply witnessing suffering. This paper explores the strengths and limitations of both thinkers, arguing that while Levinas highlights the deep ethical demand of the Other, Badiou presents a more activist and dynamic vision of ethical agency. The paper suggests that Badiou's approach may be more effective when confronting injustice or striving to build a more just world.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas; Alain Badiou; Ethics

INTRODUCTION:

Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuania-born French-Jewish philosopher, evaluates the entire tradition of Western philosophy as a philosophy of the Same. From the pre-Socratic period to Heidegger, all philosophical endeavors, according to him, have been directed toward the preservation and narcissism of a self-loving ego in the

name of freedom, autonomy, or even in the name of the Heideggerian *neuter* and *Dasein*. Levinas uncovers the hidden totalitarian tendency of Western philosophical enterprises, in which the Same embraces the Other and assimilates it into its own basket of ideas and conquests. Rejecting this philosophy of the Same, Levinas proposes an alternative thought: a philosophy of the Other—more precisely, an ethics of Otherness. Levinas' ethics of Otherness is strongly criticized by another French philosopher, Alain Badiou. This ex-Marxist-Maoist philosopher conceives of Levinas' ethics as a 'religion-based' and 'pro-capitalist'/'pro-parliamentary democracy' thought, which ultimately favors the domination of economic and military power—that is, the U.S. and its European allies. That is why this left-wing militant philosopher is highly critical of Levinas' ethics. In the present paper, I will first analyze Levinas' ethics of Otherness (ethics of responsibility), along with his idea of the face. Then, I will examine and evaluate Badiou's criticisms of Levinas' ethics.

LEVINAS' ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY:

Levinas' ethics of Otherness is, reasonably, termed the ethics of responsibility. This ethics places the highest emphasis on our social relationships. We are born into a world of social relations—relations we cannot ignore—which give us the very meaning of ourselves. That means an 'I' becomes a subject not by virtue of its membership in humankind. In other words, it is not ontological Sameness that is responsible for the subjectivation of the 'I'. Rather, an 'I' becomes an 'I'—a subject—through its relationship with the Others in society.[1] This society, in Levinasian ethics, is not limited to the 'I' and its immediate surroundings—its neighbors. It is the human society in general, in which the 'I's neighbors' neighbors—even a stranger—have a similar relationship to the 'I'. But what kind of relationship is this? According to Levinas, it is a relationship of responsibility—the responsibility of the 'I' for the Other. He describes this responsibility for the Other as the "essential, primary, and fundamental structure of subjectivity."[2]

Since responsibility for the Other, according to Levinas, is an essential

[1] Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 60, 62–63.

[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 95.

structure of subjectivity, the 'I' as a subject cannot avoid it. The 'I' must recognize the call of the Other, although it is free not to act upon that call. But if it avoids the call of the Other, Levinas says, it is always accused by itself with a bad conscience. Levinas calls this state "the state of vigilant insomnia."[3] This is the point that distinguishes the ethical 'I' from the ontological 'I'. An ontological 'I' is the 'I' for itself, whereas an ethical 'I' is an 'I' for the Other. This 'I', the ethical subject, is never satisfied with Cain's reply: "Am I my brother's keeper?"[4] The ethical 'I' is never satisfied with this sort of reply because it recognizes its responsibility for keeping its brother's betterment. In short, an ethical 'I', in Levinasian ethics, is the 'I' who always recognizes its limitless responsibility for the Other, even if it does not matter to him.

Since this responsibility for the Other is primary and fundamental, the Other enjoys privilege over the 'I'. This means that responsibility for the Other exceeds responsibility for myself when there is tension between the two. Because of this privilege, the Other, from the Levinasian point of view, is the richest. And, as the richest, it orders me to act upon its call. But at the same time, it is the poorest in the sense that it is always 'vulnerable'; it is always a subject of victimhood; it always needs my help; and it is unable to overcome its vulnerability without my help.[5] It seems that the absolute poorness of the Other originates kindness and pity in the 'I', and in this way makes its call unavoidable for the 'I'. In that sense, we can say the poorness of the Other makes it rich indeed. Here, however, Levinas again distinguishes the ethical from the ontological: it is on the ethical level where the Other is the richest, and on the ontological level where the Other is the poorest.[6]

Again, since this responsibility structures the very subjectivity of the 'I', the 'I' as a subject, according to Levinas, cannot transfer its responsibility to any other. Subjectivity is an untransferable matter. One cannot transfer one's subjectivity to another. Levinas describes:

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[3] Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, pp. 63–64.

[4] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 110.

[5] Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p. 63.

[6] Ibid., p. 63.

> My responsibility is un-transferable, no one could replace me. In fact, it is a matter of saying the very identity of the human I staring from the responsibility ... I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me.[7]

This 'un-transferable' relation between the 'I' and the Other is considered a nonsymmetrical[8] relation in Levinasian ethics. As an ethical subject, it is my responsibility to be responsible for the Other. But I cannot expect a similar response, in return, from the Other. I am to discharge my responsibility for the Other; and it is not my concern, according to Levinas, whether or not the Other discharges its responsibility for me. Levinas says:

> ... I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjection to the Other; and I am subject essentially in this sense.[9]

For Levinas, this nonsymmetrical relationship of responsibility of the 'I' for the Other is limitless. As an ethical 'I', one lives in an endless chain of responsibilities. By acting upon the call of the Other, the 'I' becomes more responsible for the Other. Levinas often quotes from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "We are all responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all others." Levinas, indeed, goes further. He does not propose any general law such as "everyone is responsible for everyone else," because in any generalization like this there is an implicit call for reciprocity, which Levinas resists.[10] His 'I', as mentioned earlier, does not care about reciprocity. Rather, its responsibility is so limitless that it is responsible even for the Other's responsibility.[11] A question naturally arises here: is my responsibility so unlimited that I am even responsible for persecutors? The Levinasian ethics of responsibility, as sketched so far,

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[7] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, pp. 110–11.

[8] Levinas sometimes used the term nonsymmetrical and sometimes asymmetrical. He appears to have used the two terms interchangeably. However, there is a significant difference between them. In this context, nonsymmetrical seems the more appropriate term. For definitions of symmetrical, asymmetrical, and nonsymmetrical relations, see I. M. Copi, *Symbolic Logic*, 5th edn (New York: Macmillan, 1979), ch. 5: 'The Logic of Relations'.

[9] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 98.

[10] Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p. 67.

[11] Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, pp. 98–99; Levinas, Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other, p. 108; Kearney, Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers, p. 67.

seems to require responsibility even for the persecutors, because the ethical 'I' knows only that it has a limitless responsibility for the Other—regardless of what the Other is doing. In that sense, the 'I' is responsible for all—for the persecutor and for the persecution. Levinas affirms this with the following words:

> I am in reality responsible for the Other even when he or she commits crimes, even when others commit crimes.[12]

However, this appears to be an initial suggestion. Levinas soon places a limit on the limitless responsibility of the 'I' by formulating the idea of justice.

In the previous paragraph, we saw that a Levinasian 'I' is responsible for the persecutors and the persecutions. But to what extent am I responsible for the persecutors or persecutions? For Levinas, I am responsible for the persecutors or persecutions only if I am the one who is persecuted. As an ethical subject, I may extend my responsibility by forgiving the persecutors. However, when I am not the one who is persecuted—but rather my neighbors or my neighbors' neighbors are—then I am not in a position to forgive the persecutors. In such cases, I cannot offer forgiveness, because the persecuted are Others to me, and I have a responsibility toward them. Thus, instead of extending limitless responsibility, here, Levinas is asking for justice. He says:

> ... I am responsible for the persecutions that I undergo. But only me! My 'close relations' or 'my people' are already the others and for them I demand justice.[13]

The Idea of justice is crucial here. It is employed not only to address the problem of the 'I's responsibility in relation to both persecutors and the persecuted, but also to mediate between the competing and conflicting calls from different Others. According to Levinas, if the world were consisted only by two—the 'I' and the only one Other of the 'I'—then there would be limitless responsibility of the 'I' for its only Other. But the reality is that there are always Others of the Other. Levinas refers to these additional Others as the "third party."[14] Since there is always the third party, there is always a possibility of competing and conflicting demands. And the 'I' cannot fulfill all those competing and conflicting demands. So, here comes the question of privilege. Some demands

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[12] Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 107.

[13] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 99.

[14] Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p. 57; Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 89.

and some Others among the Others enjoy privilege. To decide which demand, whose demand, and who will be privileged, the 'I' assesses the Others and their demands.[15] This is the state of justice, where the 'I' compares the Others. But every Other is a unique being, and for that reason, they are 'in principle' incomparable. That is why Levinas characterizes the state of justice as 'comparing the incomparable.'[16] To exercise this justice, Levinas allows institutions and the State because he thinks that, for justice, the legitimate use of power is not blameworthy but necessary. Institutions and the State are necessary because only institutions and the State can enforce this legitimate force—the justice.[17] Levinas observes a 'harmony between ethics and the state.'[18]

LEVINAS' IDEA OF THE FACE:

Now the questions arise: what makes the 'I' responsible for the Other? What does the Other have in itself that directs us to be kind to it? From the Levinasian point of view, the 'I' can encounter the Other in two ways. One way of encountering the Other is that it can come before the 'I' with its total power and freedom. The 'I', then, is challenged by the Other.[19] This is the situation that creates hatred and makes war inevitable where only brutal power is exercised. This is not an ethical situation. Levinas, however, shows another alternative way in which the Other can be encountered by the 'I'. Here, instead of approaching with brutal power, the Other presents its very face with an appeal to the 'I'—not to use brutal power, but to extend the 'I's responsibility toward it. The Other, here, does not confront the 'I'; rather, it expresses its helplessness. Levinas describes it in this way:

> But he [the Other] can also-and hence is where he presents me his face-opposes himself to me beyond all measures, with the total uncoverdness and nakedness of his defenseless eyes, the straightforwardness, the absolute frankness of his gaze.[20]

Levinas thinks that when the Other is exposed in this way, the 'I' no longer

[15] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 90.

[16] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 90; Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 104.

[17] Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 105.

[18] Ibid., p. 120.

[19] Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), p. 109.

[20] Ibid., pp. 109–10.

feels hatred toward the Other; rather, it becomes ashamed of its crime and the unjust use of its power. Thus, instead of enmity, the 'I' becomes responsible for the Other. So, the face-to-face relation is the primary mode of responsibility. In Levinas' words: "... access to the face is straightway ethical."[21] The face is not like other expressionless worldly phenomena—it has expressions. It "expresses its very expression" without deception.[22] It has its own language. Its nudity—its helplessness—is its language. Even its very silence speaks; it says: 'Thou shalt not kill.'

According to Levinas, the primary expression of the face — 'Thou shalt not kill' — is such a powerful command that one cannot avoid this call. Even if one refuses this call, one nevertheless lives with a bad conscience for one's deed.[23] In that sense a face commands from height. But at the same time, in the Levinasian scheme, a call of the face of the Other is a call from destitution, since a face, by showing its very face, shows its absolute helplessness and asks for kindness, pity, equality and justice.[24] This primary call of the face of the Other—Thou shalt not kill—from height and destitution resists the 'I' to be unjust. It resists not by its brutal power, but by putting the 'I's excessive use of power into question. The 'I' thus realizes that its use of brutal power is unjust. This realization makes the 'I' ashamed of its unjust use of power, and then it becomes responsible to respond to the call of the Other's face.[25] That is, the Other resists the 'I' not in the usual way of resistance that includes the use of power. That is why Levinas characterizes this resistance as 'the resistance of what has no resistance.'[26] This 'unforeseeable' resistance is termed 'ethical resistance' in Levinasian ethics.[27]

It seems from the above discussion that Levinasian ethics stands in opposition to *autonomous freedom*—the subjective freedom—that, according to Levinas, has

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[21] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 85.

[22] Peperzak, *To the Other*, p. 110.

[23] Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p. 64.

[24] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979)., p. 213; Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 86.

[25] Peperzak, *To the Other*, p. 118.

[26] Ibid., p. 110.

[27] Ibid., p. 110.

long been celebrated by the Western tradition. For Levinas, autonomous freedom sings the song of gaining victory over the Other. All it does is aimed at conquest, striving to absorb everything into itself for the sake of enjoyment and relief. All its efforts are directed toward reducing the Other to the Same. Levinas says:

> Freedom, autonomy, the reduction of the Other to the Same, lead to this formula: the conquest of being by man over the course of history.[28]

In its pursuit of conquest, autonomous freedom never pauses to question whether its actions are just. So, it does not recognize any responsibility for the Other over whom it is running its act of conquering. Rejecting such an 'irresponsible' freedom, Levinas' ethics glorifies *heteronymous freedom* which is obliged to the Other. In the state of heteronymous freedom, the 'I' acknowledges its limitless responsibility to respond to the call of the Other's face. But heteronymous freedom is still a form of freedom, and hence the 'I' remains free not to act upon the call of the Other's face. However, unlike autonomous freedom, in the state of heteronymous freedom, the 'I' must first recognize that it is being called by the Other—even before it chooses to deny acting upon that call.[29] So, Levinas should not be misunderstood as subverting the freedom of the 'I', for the Levinasian 'I', as mentioned earlier, remains free even in the state of heteronymous freedom. It is free, but with the recognition of its responsibility for the Other. In this sense, Levinas introduces a *higher kind of freedom*. Heteronymous freedom may be considered higher from both quantitative and qualitative points of view. It is higher quantitatively because it encompasses all Others in addition to the 'I' itself. It is higher qualitatively because it includes the recognition of responsibility, and consequently, the recognition of justice.

It is, however, often objected that Levinas' ethics of responsibility (and his idea of the face) is a utopian concept. Levinas is quite concerned about this. However, he does not seem to acknowledge it as utopian in the usual sense of the term. Instead, he offers examples from everyday life that reflect our default stance: the primacy of the Other. He says:

> ... even the smallest and most commonplace gestures, such as saying 'after you' as we sit at dinner the dinner table or walk through a door, bear witness to the

[28] Ibid., p. 91.

[29] Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p. 63.

ethical.[30]

Thus, the ethics of responsibility is not, for Levinas, an unachievable idea. In our everyday actions, we often become 'being-for-the-Other' before becoming 'being-for-the-self'. Levinas' ethics of responsibility, and his idea of the face, affirm and glorify this state of 'being-for-the-Other'.

BADIOU'S CRITICISMS AND ITS EVALUATION:

Like any other philosophical discourse, Levinas' ethics of responsibility and his idea of the face have received extensive criticism from philosophers and commentators. Among them, Alain Badiou is perhaps the most vehement in his critique. Badiou, one of the most prominent un-American (though not necessarily anti-American) [31] French philosophers, proposes an alternative ethical discourse known as the 'ethics of truths' (truths in the plural). Like many other left-wing thinkers, Badiou dismisses Levinas' ethics of responsibility as a pious discourse. And if we strip it of its religious character, Badiou contends, what remains is nothing more than "a dog's dinner."[32] However, I will not address all of Badiou's criticisms in this paper. For the present purpose, I will focus only on those critiques most directly relevant to Levinas' ethics of responsibility and his concept of the face of the Other. To make this discussion more accessible, I will divide Badiou's relevant criticisms into three thematic sections:

1. The Face as Me-myself-at-a-distance
2. Ethics as a Pious Discourse

The Camouflage of the Celebrated Dictum 'Respect for the Other'

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[30] Ibid., p. 68.

[31] By the words 'un-American philosopher', I mean a philosopher who does not think in a way that, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, aligns with the all-encompassing domination of America and its European partners. Badiou argues that ideas such as human rights, respect for others, respect for difference or multiculturalism, and parliamentary democracy ultimately serve to uphold the domination of the US and its military and economic allies. That is why I have used that term for Badiou. I believe that by "America" Badiou does not mean only the United States, but rather any dominant power—military or economic. This is why I have placed the phrase 'not anti-American' in brackets.

[32] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 23.

THE FACE AS ME-MYSELF-AT-A-DISTANCE:

Badiou argues that the *phenomenological analysis* of the face fails to explain why the Same is obliged to be responsible for the Other. A face, he contends, cannot command me or compel my devotion simply by virtue of being the face of the Other. Rather, what makes me devoted to the Other, according to Badiou, is that I find myself in the face of the Other. Badiou adopts this *mimetic conception* from psychoanalysis. Referring to Lacan's idea of the mirror effect (from *The Mirror Stage*, in *Écrits: A Selection*, 1966/77), Badiou suggests that the 'I' sees its own reflection in the face of the Other. The Same cherishes the Other because the Other represents him—that is, the Same. Badiou writes about the face:

> .... what I cherish is that me-myself-at-a-distance which, precisely because it is 'objectified' for my consciousness, founds me as a stable construction, as an interiority accessible *in its exteriority*.[33]

So, the reason why the Same becomes devoted to the Other, according to Badiou, is not the epiphany of the face, but rather the Same's perception of the Other's face as "me-myself-at-a-distance." In Badiou's system, then, the ontology of Sameness precedes ethics and the responsibility for the Other. Badiou proclaims this clearly:

> ... the finitude of the other's appearing certainly *can* be conceived as resemblance, or as imitation, and thus lead back to the logic of the Same.[34]

Since the Other is conceived as an imitation of the Same, only the ontology of Sameness can provide a ground for ethical responsibility. In that sense, Badiou not only attacks Levinas' idea of the face but also attempts to challenge his claim about the primacy of ethics.

I think that Badiou is not unjustified here. If we look at the practicalities of our social life, we can see the validity of the 'mirror-effect.' The father-son relationship is a good example. I am more devoted to the call of my son's face than to that of any other. But why is this so? The answer is simple: because his face represents 'me-myself-at-a-distance' more than the face of any other does. Am I not more devoted to my next-door neighbor's face (the Other) than to the face of my neighbor's neighbors (the Others of the Other)? We share cultural,

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[33] Ibid., p. 21.

[34] Ibid., p. 22.

political, and social ties more closely with our neighbors than with our neighbors' neighbors. Thus, my neighbor resembles me more than my neighbor's neighbors do. In other words, I have a clearer and more vivid image of myself in my neighbor's face than in the face of my neighbor's neighbors. That is why, in practical life, we tend to feel more responsibility toward our neighbors than toward the neighbors of our neighbors. Therefore, it is the image of our 'me-myself-at-a-distance,' not the Otherness of the Other, that motivates our responsibility for the Other. Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that the 'epiphany' of 'me-myself-at-a-distance' even surpasses the idea of justice. However, it can be argued that Levinas is not concerned with the motivation that makes the 'I' responsible for the Other; rather, he addresses a different level of ethics—a different set of questions. Yet, this way of avoiding Badiou's criticism will not suffice, because to provide a strong foundation for his ethics of responsibility, Levinas needs to answer the question: What makes me, as an ethical 'I,' devoted to the Other? Levinas' failure to address this question properly leaves his ethics of responsibility ill-grounded.

At any rate, it appears that Badiou is criticizing Levinas' 'phenomenological analysis of the face,' whereas Levinas himself states that he is not interested in providing a phenomenological analysis of the face! In fact, the phrases 'phenomenology of the face' or 'phenomenological analysis of the face' seem misleading in this context. We can recall a quotation from Levinas where he clearly says:

> I do not know if one can speak of a 'phenomenology' of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. ... I think rather that access to the face is straightway ethical.[35]

Probably, Levinas' idea of the primacy of ethics leads him to speak of an ethics of the face directly, one that is not dependent on the phenomenology of the face. Yet, interestingly, what he offers can also be seen as a phenomenology of the face. This creates a tension within Levinasian ethics that, I think, can only be resolved by relinquishing the idea of the 'primacy of ethics over ontology.' It is ontology that can provide a proper foundation for ethical propositions. However, even if we concede, for the sake of argument, that Badiou's use of the phrase

[35] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 85.

'phenomenological analysis of the face' is inaccurate here, this does not invalidate his criticisms of Levinas' idea of the face. The critique remains equally valid if we substitute the phrase 'ethics of the face,' 'ethical call of the face,' or 'epiphany of the face' for 'phenomenological analysis of the face.' In other words, Badiou's criticisms of Levinas' concept of the face hold the same force and significance regardless of the terminology used.

ETHICS AS A PIOUS DISCOURSE:

Badiou considers Levinas' ethics of responsibility a pious discourse. For Badiou, it is not truly a philosophy—"not even a philosophy as 'servant' of theology."[36] To support his point, Badiou argues that the simple phenomenon of the face, as discussed in the section 'The face as me-myself-at-a-distance,' of the finite Other cannot 'guarantee' the ethical primacy of the Other over the Same. Therefore, it requires a principle higher than the finite Other, one that transcends our finite experience of the Other. Levinas then posits an infinite principle called the 'Altogether-Other.' For Badiou, this Altogether-Other is nothing more than the ethical name for God. Badiou explains Levinas' idea in the following way:

> ... in order to be intelligible, ethics requires that the Other be in some sense *carried by a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience. Levinas calls this principle the 'Altogether-Other, and it is quite obviously the ethical name for God. ... There can be no ethics without God the ineffable.[37]

Hence, Levinas's ethics depends on religious beliefs and values and is essentially religious. For Badiou, it is therefore not a philosophy, nor is it theology. Rather, it is an ethics of 'decomposed religion.' And if this religious element is removed from Levinas' ethics, what remains, Badiou says, is nothing but 'a dog's dinner.' Badiou states:

> What then becomes of this category if we claim to suppress, or mask, its religious character, all the while preserving the abstract arrangement of its apparent constitution ('recognition of the other', etc.)? The answer is obvious: a dog's dinner [*de la bouillie pour les chats*].[38]

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[36] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, pp. 22–23.

[37] Ibid., p. 22.

[38] Ibid., p. 23.

Badiou rejects this religion-based 'anti-philosophy,' which, in his view, ultimately opposes the militant pursuit of truth. He considers it 'anti-philosophy' because he believes this approach reduces philosophy to mere moralism.

Badiou's characterization of Levinasian ethics as a pious discourse is apparently correct. It is a fact that Levinas' ethics includes God—the infinite Other—as an essential component. In his ethics, God shines through the face of the Other. Levinas holds that access to a face means access to the idea of God.[39] God speaks through the glory of the face and calls for an "ethical conversation or reversal of our nature."[40] For Levinas, this voice of God through the face of the Other is not a metaphorical utterance; it is, for him, "literally true."[41]Moreover, many Talmudic and Biblical verses are heavily used in his philosophical texts and interviews. Therefore, Badiou's hunch is not unreasonable.

But a closer examination allows us to argue in favour of Levinas' ethics. If it were theology, then either its propositions would be justified by the very idea of God and religious sources, or it would aim to justify God and sacred texts. However, if we take a careful look at Levinas' ethics, we find that it is neither justified by the idea of God or by Talmudic–Biblical verses, nor does it aim to support or confirm them. For example, in his 'face-to-face relation', one can observe the trace of God in Other's face, but it is not the case that one cannot avoid the call of the Other's face because one observes the trace of God in the face. Rather, One cannot turn away from the face not because it bears the trace of God, but because of its helplessness, absolute frankness, and bareness—qualities that directly confront and challenge one's own power. Therefore, the idea of responsibility is not grounded in the idea of God, nor does it serve to validate the very idea of God. Of course, Levinas' philosophy is a theistic one, and as such, references to God and to the Talmud or Bible naturally appear in it. Talmudic and Biblical verses enter his texts and interviews as footnotes or, at most, analogies. But his ethics is not based on these sources, even if it aligns with them in several respects. Levinas clarifies his position in a dialogue with Richard

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[39] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 92.

[40] Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p. 60.

[41] Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 110.

Kearney:

> I already make a clear distinction, in what I write, between philosophy and confessional texts. I do not deny that they may ultimately have a common source of inspiration. I simply state that it is necessary to draw a line of demarcation between them as distinct method of exigencies, as separate languages. I would never, for example, introduce a Talmudic or biblical verse into one of my philosophical texts to try to prove or justify a phenomenological argument.[42]

My observation here is simply this: Levinas maintains his *fidelity* to the commitment not to introduce Talmudic or biblical verses into philosophy as a means of proving or justifying phenomenological arguments. The mere inclusion of the idea of God does not necessarily reduce a philosophical theory to a theological one. Therefore, Badiou is mistaken in characterising Levinas' ethics as a pious discourse. Levinas' ethics stands as an ethical system in its own right. And even if its alleged religious elements were removed, it would still remain an ethics. Levinas' ethics is not, as Badiou claims, merely "a dog's dinner," but precisely an ethics—pure and simple.

THE CAMOUFLAGE OF THE CELEBRATED DICTUM 'RESPECT FOR THE OTHER':

Badiou maintains that the ethics of Otherness—or the catchy formulas such as 'respect for the Other' or 'recognition of differences,' which are based on Levinasian ethics of responsibility—are deeply problematic. Otherness and difference are banal facts; but according to Badiou, they do not constitute an 'ethics' in the Levinasian fashion. It is true that, as human beings, each of us is unique. We are different from one another, and there are many Others. So what? These banal facts, Badiou argues, do no more than indicate our multiplicity as humankind. He describes:

But what we must recognize is that these differences hold no interest for thought, that they amount to nothing more than the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of human kind, as obvious in the difference between me and my cousin from Lyon as it is between the Shi'ite 'community' of the Iraq and the fat

[42] Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p. 54.

cowboy of Texas.[43]

The so-called formula 'respect for the Other', in Badiou's view, is merely another name for the bourgeois liberal-democratic idea of tolerance. But this idea of tolerance is itself a problematic concept. What does tolerance mean? In a so-called liberal-democratic society, tolerance means that there are Others who hold different opinions and behave differently, and that one should not be offended by the differences they embody.[44] But to what extent does bourgeois society truly tolerate difference? According to Badiou, it tolerates difference only insofar as that difference does not conflict with the interests and beliefs of the dominant forces. If a difference radically opposes those interests and beliefs, the Other is then categorized as the 'bad' Other, and no respect is extended to it. Pointing to the United States and its European allies as dominant forces, Badiou provides an example of this intolerance disguised as tolerance and respect for the Other:

> For them, African customs are barbaric, Muslims are dreadful, the Chinese are totalitarian, and so on. ... To prove the point, just consider the obsessive resentment expressed by the partisans of ethics regarding anything that resembles an Islamic 'fundamentalists'[45]

Thus, it seems that the Other is respected only when the Other is a 'good' Other. And an Other is considered good if it surrenders all of its differences to the dominant military and economic powers (the US and its European partners). In other words, *the Other is Other if it is not the Other*. Such an ethical ideology—namely, 'respect for the Other'—according to Badiou, contributes nothing genuinely progressive to ethics. What it does, rather, is validate the dominance of power by creating a camouflage of human rights and respect for others.

Badiou's criticism of the celebrated dictum 'respect for the Other', I think, deserves appreciation. His insightful analysis exposes the deceptive character of this widely revered formula. If we examine the present world order, we can see the justification for Badiou's criticism. Everyone talks about respect for the Other. Everything is done under this ideology. But what is actually happening in the name of respect for the Other? Nearly all wars initiated in the early twenty-first

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[43] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 26.

[44] Ibid., p. 20.

[45] Ibid., p. 24.

century were launched under the banner of respect for Others. The NATO war on Serbia occurred in the name of respecting the human rights of Serbians; the US invasion of Iraq was carried out in the name of respect for the human rights of the Iraqi people and for the global community allegedly endangered by the Saddam regime; the US invasion of Afghanistan, too, was justified in the name of respect for Others. Why is Cuba isolated by the US and its European partners? That, too, is justified in the name of respect for liberal democracy—a democracy which, according to capitalist liberal society, upholds respect for Others. So, all of these actions are conducted in the name of the dictum 'respect for the Other' or 'human rights'. But a deeper look reveals that the actual aim of all these interventions was to establish and maintain the domination of the US and its European allies over the world.

In fact, the very concept of the 'recognition of the Other,' on which the celebrated dictum 'respect for the Other' is based, is problematic. The Other is defined as the one who has a face. But not everyone has a face. If we look at Levinas' idea of the face-to-face relation, we see that there is an issue concerning the recognition of the face. We can recall the following passage from Levinas:

> ... he [the Other] resists me with all of his force and all the unpredictable resources of his own freedom. I measure myself against him. But he can also—and here is where he presents me his face—opposes himself to me beyond all measures, with the total uncoveredness and nakedness of his defenseless eyes, the straightforwardness, the absolute frankness of his gaze ...[46]

Here we see three things: first, when the Other confronts me with his own freedom and power, there is no face-to-face relation. In other words, the Other does not have a face in that situation. The use of brutal power is not censured in this case. Second, the face of the Other is recognized when the Other, in fact, surrenders with its 'defenseless eyes' and 'absolute frankness of its gaze.' Thus, the Other is an Other (the good Other) when it accepts domination. And the Other is not the Other (or the bad Other) when it continues with its own freedom and uniqueness. That is what Badiou mentions in his criticism: *the Other is Other if it is not the Other*. Third, there is an indirect recognition of the dominance of the dominant force: I, the powerful one, am here to give justice; so come to me with

[46] Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, pp. 109–10 (my brackets).

your defenselessness; I will give you justice. And what kind of justice am I going to give you? Well, I won't kill you; I won't harm you; but if you do not keep quiet, if you come to me with your freedom, then be ready to face my brutal power. That means Levinas' ethics recognizes two classes: *justice giver* and *justice receiver*. Such an ethics will not contribute to establishing equality. Rather, it will suppress or delay the potential militant efforts that could challenge a society built on inequality. What human society needs is not 'pity' but 'equality'; not the 'less Evil' but 'the Good.' It seems to me that Levinas' ethics of responsibility appeals for pity to the dominant force instead of equality. It struggles for less Evil instead of fighting for the Good. Thus, it appears that Levinas' ethics of responsibility provides some space for domination by established powers and institutions. With this observation in mind, it is reasonable to claim that Badiou's criticisms of Levinasian ethics of responsibility are not unjust. Rather, Badiou should be appreciated for his insightful analysis, which reveals the implicit deceptive characteristics of the widely respected dictum 'respect for the Other.'

One thing needs to be clarified here. Although I have endorsed Badiou's criticisms described above, I am not claiming that Levinas' ethics of responsibility was formulated with the aim of validating the domination of established power. I recognize and appreciate Levinas' good intentions. However, at the same time, I observe that Levinas' ethics of responsibility does not offer any concrete means to end such domination. Rather, it unintentionally leaves room for the dominant force to validate its authority by invoking Levinasian ideas. But this is certainly not the true aim of Levinas' ethics. Even Badiou, despite his rigorous criticisms of Levinas, acknowledges his good intention. He says:

> ... this ideology of 'right to difference', the contemporary catechism of goodwill with regards to 'other culture', are strikingly distant from Levinas's actual conception of things.[47]

Thus, Levinas appears to be an unfortunate philosopher whose 'philosophy of love'—though undoubtedly well-intentioned—ends up, unintentionally, providing a weapon of hatred and domination to the dominant.

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[47] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p. 20.

CONCLUSION:

Alain Badiou's criticisms of Levinas' ethics of responsibility seem to be justified—at least in many cases—when considered in the context of the present world. However, it must be noted that although Levinas' and Badiou's views appear to be in conflict, they are not radically different in essence. One can observe significant similarities in their ultimate goals. The goal of Levinas' ethics of responsibility is, I think, to reconstruct the Same as a Same that is responsible for the Other. And if we look more deeply into Badiou's view, we will see that he calls for a Same who is 'indifferent to differences' and who recognizes that 'the truth is the same for all.' Such a Same, certainly, does not live only for itself. In this sense, Badiou's Same is also responsible for the Other. However, Badiou's ethics is comparatively more 'militant.' His moral agent (the Same) is not a moral agent simply by virtue of being a member of the human species. His moral agent achieves this agency by actively participating in the ongoing truth process. Badiou states, "... it's necessary to be the 'activist' of a truth."[48] Not only that a moral agent must be active to achieve something; not active just to escape from victimhood. In Badiou's words:

> ... I've had enough of *fighting against* of 'deconstruction', of 'surpassing', of 'putting an end to' etc. My philosophy desires affirmation. I want to *fight for*; I am for heroism, I am for the affirmation of the thought and the deed.[49]

On the contrary, Levinas' ethics does not necessitate that sort of 'activity' for becoming a moral agent. Of course, in the Levinasian scheme, subjectivation is not purely a 'non-active' process. But what it asks for subjectivation is the realization and recognition of the Other—or at least, it asks us not to do harm: '*do not do Evil*'. But this '*do not do Evil*' is essentially a state of escape—a negative activity. It does not compel us, nor even encourage us, to uproot the very foundation of the unjust social order. What we need is not an ethics of '*do not do Evil*', but an ethics of '*do Good*'. Through an ethics of negative activity, one can only be an element of history, not truly a hero within it. A hero is one who makes history, not merely one who belongs to it. It is through an ethics of positive activity—an ethics of '*do Good*'—that one becomes a history-maker. It is Alain

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[48] Christoph Cox and Molly Whalen, 'On Evil: An Interview with Alain Badiou', *Cabine*t, no. 5, Winter 2001, retrieved 4 March 2005, http://www.lacan.com/badiou-on-evil.html.

[49] Ibid. (my italics)

Badiou, not Levinas, who attempts to offer such an ethics: an ethics of affirmation, of action. For me, if I am asked to choose between Levinas and Badiou, I will stand with Badiou. My preference is for action rather than patience; *fighting for* rather than *fighting against*; equality rather than domination; truth rather than sentiment; heroism rather than victimhood. And therefore: Alain Badiou, rather than Emmanuel Levinas.

Professor
Department of Philosophy
Jahangirnagar University
Savar, Dhaka
Bangladesh
&
Adjunct Professor
Department of History and Philosophy
North South University
Dhaka
Bangladesh

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