Priority of Response: Levinas and the Phenomenology of the Third Party

Joseph P. Paña
Bohol Island State University

Abstract. The third party, in a general sense, often carries a negative implication. It is associated with conflict, injustice, broken relationships, and other disturbances to the direct I-Other relationship. In contrast, within Levinas's ethical framework, the concept of the third party acquires a complex and positive ethical dimension that reconfigures the I-Other relationship. This paper examines the socio-ethical connection between the Other and the "other Others," which Levinas refers to as the "third party," and explores why the concept of the third party in Levinas's ethical philosophy carries a positive meaning. It investigates how the third party leads to justice itself and examines various interpretations of Levinas's notion of the third party. Consequently, this paper seeks to extend and elaborate on the interpretation of Levinas's asymmetrical I-Other relation by examining his notion and discussion of the third party in his ethical thought. This paper contends that Levinas's treatment of the ethical relationship between the primary Other and secondary Others—what he terms the "third party"—remains underdeveloped. Specifically, Levinas does not clarify whether the Other holds a higher ethical ground over the other Others, who also demand justice and compel us to respond.

Keywords: the Other, the other Others, the third party, asymmetrical relation, face-to-face encounter, responsibility, totality and infinity

Introduction

Western philosophy has traditionally been concerned with the fundamental inquiry into "being"—a central theme that has historically structured its discourse—until thinkers like Levinas reoriented this focus toward the ethical primacy of the Other. Levinas shifts the focus from "being" to the "Other," asserting that justice begins with the Other. Ethics, rather than metaphysics, is the "first philosophy." He critiques Martin Heidegger's ontology in *Being and Time* (1927) for reducing the Other to sameness and for prioritizing the relationship with being over the relationship with the Other. According to Levinas (1987, 46), this ontology remains bound to the anonymous and inevitably results in power, imperialist domination, and

tyranny. This is why Levinas is very critical of Heidegger's support of the Nazi regime.

In essence, Levinas's philosophy is a critique of the entire tradition of Greek philosophy, particularly Heidegger's ontology, which prioritizes the inquiry into "being-as-such", conceived as "more primordial." In his seminal works, *Totality and Infinity* (1969)[1] and *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1979), Levinas argues that our ethical responsibility to the Other and to the "third party"—the other Others, the many Others who make up society—is "pre-original." This responsibility precedes anything "said," any concept of "being" or the "letting-be of things" or *Aletheia* (as in Heidegger's *Being and Time*), and even the notion of "freedom" (as in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*). Robert Bernasconi (2002, 8) describes Levinas's ethical philosophy as an attempt to articulate a relationship with the Other that cannot be reduced to comprehension. This is encapsulated in Levinas's famous notion of the "face-to-face encounter with the Other." Levinas presents an unconventional view of ethical responsibility, one that is unescapable and incomprehensible, transcending any conceptual framework.

Although there are now many scholarly works on Levinas's ethical philosophy of the Other, relatively few studies focus on his phenomenology of the third party. This paper does not aim to cover the entirety of Levinas's ethical philosophy, which is too vast to be condensed into a single theme. Instead, it focuses on analyzing the socio-ethical relationship between the Other and the numerous Others—the "third party"—and explores why the third party has a positive meaning in Levinas's ethical philosophy. This paper investigates how the third party leads to justice and examines various interpretations of Levinas's notion of the third party. Its primary aim is to extend and elaborate on the interpretation of Levinas's asymmetrical I-Other relationship by scrutinizing his notions and discussions of the third party in his ethical thought.

This paper contends that Levinas's treatment of the ethical relationship between the primary Other and secondary Others—what he terms the "third party"—remains underdeveloped. In Levinas's view, the Other enjoys primacy over the self (me). The Other is not like me; the Other

[1] Jacques Derrida (2000, 21) remarks that Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* is a "treatise on hospitality," highlighting a central ethical theme: the encounter with the Other. Levinas presents ethics as "first philosophy," arguing that human subjectivity is fundamentally shaped by the ethical demand of the Other, whose face disrupts totalizing structures and calls for infinite responsibility. Derrida's engagement with *Totality and Infinity* suggests that Levinas's ethics can be read as a call for unconditional hospitality—an openness that refuses to reduce the Other to the Same.

is irreducible to the Same.[2] The I-Other relationship is inherently asymmetrical. However, what remains unclear is the nature of the ethical relationship between the Other and the many Others who also demand justice and command our response. Is the ethical relationship between the Other and the other others (the third party) also asymmetrical? Which ethical obligation should be prioritized within this asymmetrical framework, and does the primary Other maintain a superior claim to responsibility compared to the collective of additional Others?

The Primacy of the Other: An Overview of Levinas's Notion of the Other[3]

One of the prominent philosophers who attempted to include the topic of "otherness" in their philosophical analysis is Jean-Paul Sartre. In his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1958, 251–257) emphasizes that our awareness of the existence of the Other as a subject constitutes the original relation of the Other to us. This relation is primarily based on our "pre-ontological" (pre-reflective) comprehension of the world in which we exist. For Sartre (1958, 270-284), the Other is different from us by virtue of their very nature as Other. The state of "not-being-the-Other" is never given but is perpetually chosen in a constant process of renewal: consciousness can only "not be the Other" insofar as it is conscious of itself as not being the Other. However, ontologically, the Other is on equal footing with us because we share the apodicticity of existence, namely self-consciousness.

Another philosopher who highlighted the importance of the topic of the Other is Martin Buber. In his famous work *I and Thou* (1958), Buber examines the fundamental relationship between the I and the Other, presenting his ideas in an aphoristic style. For Buber, human existence is defined by two primary modes of engagement: the *"I-It"* and the *"I-Thou"* relationships. Buber (1958, 3) writes that the world appears to a person in two ways, shaped by their two distinct attitudes. These attitudes, in turn, stem from the fundamental types of words they use. The "I-It" attitude reflects a detached, objective stance, where the Other is seen as an object to be analyzed, utilized, or categorized. In contrast, the "I-Thou" attitude

[2] In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Levinas speaks of "exteriority" as the location of a point of "otherness" that cannot be reduced to the Same. He characterizes the Other as a reality irreducible to any consciousness (see "Exteriority and the Face," 187-247).

[3] In Levinas's ethical philosophy, the concept of "primacy" refers to the first and most immediate ethical responsibility that one feels toward the Other. The question seeks to uncover who or what occupies this primary position in the ethical relationship. Levinas (1969, 45–80) argues that this primacy belongs to the Other, as the encounter with the Other is foundational to ethical responsibility. However, this question opens the possibility of exploring whether there is ever a contest for this primacy, especially when considering multiple Others or the role of the third party.

represents a profound, mutual relationship, where the "I" encounters the Other in its full authenticity. This is what Buber refers to as "reciprocity." Thus, for Buber, these two modes of interaction are not merely linguistic constructs but are deeply embedded in how individuals perceive and engage with the world. The choice of attitude determines the quality of relationships—whether one views the Other as a mere "It" to serve a purpose or as a "Thou," a partner in genuine dialogue and connection.

However, unlike Sartre and Buber, who affirmed a symmetrical relationship between me and the Other—where the Other is like me—Levinas argues that the ethical relationship between me and the Other is inherently asymmetrical and can never be reciprocal. For Levinas (1969, 49-80), the Other holds the higher ethical ground and is superior to me. The Other is infinite, absolutely Other, and beyond the confines of objective experience. It can never be reduced to the Same (totality). This is why the Other enjoys primacy over me. However, this does not mean that I am a slave to the Other. I am also an Other to the Other, just as the Other is Other to me. In this sense, everyone is both a master and a servant simultaneously. Levinas (1985, 89) explains that the face of the Other conveys a profound message: "You shall not kill." This is not merely a suggestion but a command, as though it comes directly from a higher authority. At the same time, the face reveals vulnerability and need, for it belongs to someone who is destitute—someone for whom we can do everything and to whom we owe everything. As "first-persons," regardless of who we are, we are called upon to find the means to respond to this call.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that, for Levinas, our relationship with the Other differs from the relationship of the Other to us. He does not adhere to a Buberian concept of reciprocity. Levinas (1985, 98-99) asserts that we are responsible for the Other without expecting anything in return, even to the point of sacrificing our lives for it. The self always bears one responsibility beyond all others. He further elaborates that this asymmetrical and infinite responsibility is so profound that the self can give away the bread from his/her mouth or even sacrifice his/her own skin (Levinas 1979, 77). Levinas emphasizes an ultimate form of generosity and selflessness, arguing that our ethical responsibility involves a profound willingness for the Other.

This I-Other relation, however, becomes problematic with the entrance of the third party. Levinas acknowledges that no issues arise if proximity directs us solely toward the Other. Our ethical responsibility toward the Other becomes complicated only when the third party enters this I-Other relation. As Levinas (1979, 157) explains that if proximity were solely directed toward the other, without involving anyone else, there would be no

problem in any general sense. No question would arise, nor would there be consciousness or self-consciousness. The responsibility for the other exists as an immediate experience, preceding any questions—it is proximity itself. This responsibility becomes troubling and turns into a problem when a third party is introduced into the I-Other relationship.

The Third Party[4] and the Asymmetrical I-Other Relation

In his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1969, 213) provides a brief outline of the "third party" in the asymmetrical I-Other relationship. He argues that the third party looks at us through the eyes of the Other. Language represents justice. Levinas explains that it is not that the face appears first, and then the being it reveals concerns itself with justice. Rather, the appearance of the face, in its very essence, opens the path to humanity. The face, in its bare essence (nakedness), shows us the destitution of the poor and the stranger. However, this poverty and exile, which call upon our abilities, address us but do not surrender themselves to those abilities as simple givens—they remain the expression of the face. The poor and the stranger present themselves as equals. Their equality in this fundamental poverty lies in referring to the third party, who is already present in the encounter, and whom the Other, in their destitution, already serves. The presence of the third party, while entering the I-Other relationship, assumes a paradoxical role: it is both a summons and a challenge. It compels ethical engagement not by subordination alone, but by imposing an obligation that reconfigures our understanding of responsibility. The "thou" is placed before a "we." To be a "we" is not about simply gathering around a common task; it is the presence of the face, the infinity of the Other, a form of destitution, a presence of the third party (representing all of humanity looking at us), and a command that compels us to command.

In *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas (1979, 35) briefly notes that the introduction of a third party is not just an addition to the Other; from the outset, the third party is both distinct from the Other and positions us as one among others. This form of alterity is fundamentally ethical, not merely

[4] Sartre (1976, 100–109), in *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. I*, discusses the notion of "mediating third parties" to explain the nature of groups beyond I-Thou relations. According to Sartre (2004, 373), mediating third parties are group members who temporarily act as external threats but later rejoin the group. However, for Levinas, the third party plays a fundamentally different role. Rather than merely mediating between individuals in a group, the third party disrupts the direct I-Other relation and introduces ethical complexity. At the same time, this disruption expands the scope of responsibility—from an ethical obligation to a single Other toward a responsibility for multiple Others, extending beyond immediate interpersonal encounters to a broader, more universal ethical demand. This shift marks a departure from the existentialist framework, emphasizing ethics as first philosophy rather than conflict or mediation as the foundation of social relations.

numerical; it involves a dynamic of appeal and challenge. Recognizing that the one for whom and before whom we are responsible is also responsible to another does not diminish or negate their position in relation to us. Rather, it reveals the demand for justice and the presence of another responsibility among Others. In short, for Levinas (1979, 157), the "third party" is distinct from the neighbor, yet also another neighbor, a neighbor of the Other, and not merely their companion (fellow).

In *The Ego and the Totality*, Levinas (1987) argued that the face-to-face encounter with the Other cannot be restricted to the intimacy of love,[5] as this would limit our responsibility and attention to only those who are closest to us, leaving everyone else out. If ethics were confined only to intimate relations, it would create a very narrow circle of concern, excluding anyone outside of that circle from ethical responsibility. The third party stands alongside and behind this singular Other, who compels us in the present moment through their mere presence. Because ethical responsibility is not tied to any particular trait of this Other, but instead to their very introduction into our world, all Others place the same obligation on us as this one does. In Perperzak's (1993, 31) interpretation, when confronted with this Other, we perceive the potential presence of all people. However, since it is impossible to act as the servant of everyone, the situation requires categorizing all Others under a universal concept that allows us to speak of them in general terms. Furthermore, Burggraeve (2002, 123) noted that Levinas's third party encompasses not only the other Others who are distant but also future Others. These many Others are not always—and often are not—present to be seen or heard.

Hence, Bernasconi (1999) clarifies that in Levinas's ethical philosophy, the third-party relation is not merely an addition to the face-to-face encounter. Although Levinas occasionally framed the third party as entering at a later stage in a narrative that begins with the face-to-face relation, he also described the third party as already inherent in the face of the Other. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas at one point portrayed the third party as emerging only after the relationship with the Other—the second—had been established, suggesting that the third party's presence depends on the prior existence of this fundamental ethical relationship.

Thus, Borkowski (2016) interprets Levinas's third party as the horizontal dimension of ontology, directed and uplifted toward the Other. She argues that Levinas does not propose a sequential relationship in which

[5] Burggraeve (2002, 124) describes Levinas's phenomenology of love, which occurs at the level of experience, as a "closed community" between two people committed exclusively to one another. Consequently, this inherently and involuntarily excludes the third party.

the face of the Other precedes the appearance of the third party. Instead, the face serves as the meeting point of the vertical and horizontal dimensions, revealing the entirety of humanity. Through this revelation, it confronts the subject with the presence of the poor and the stranger.

Beyond the Face-to-Face: Critiques of Levinas's Third Party

Who holds the higher ethical ground? Who holds primacy? Is the third party also an (infinite) Other to the Other? These are some of the questions that this paper wanted to address. In his writings, Levinas did not provide a definitive account of this problem. In Levinas's ethical philosophy, ethics is understood primarily as the responsibility one has toward the Other. However, the question here is whether some Others are ethically more significant than Others. Let us now examine how Levinas scholars address this important issue.

One objection to Levinas's notion of the "third party" is raised by Peperzak. Although he does not directly address the third party, in his book *To the Other*, Peperzak (1993, 30) states that if the existence of even a single other person already imposes on us infinite responsibility and commitment, how can we manage the reality that, throughout our lives, we are confronted not only with a few Others but with countless Others? This objection is closely related to the unresolved question regarding the I-Other relation and the third party: How exactly are face-to-face relations connected to collective structures? A similar argument is raised by Peter Atterton in his article titled "In Defense of Violence: Levinas and the Problem of Justice." He questions whether we are not also responsible for the "third party" or "another neighbor." Who deserves more care and attention? Whose needs are most urgent? In fulfilling our duties toward one person, do we not risk not only neglecting but also harming the Other? What role do we play in justice?

Accordingly, another set of questions is raised by Simmons in his article *The Third* (1999). He argues that with the introduction of the third party, the I's focus becomes divided, no longer exclusively directed toward the other. Responsibility takes on a different form. Are both individuals truly considered the other? How can the I maintain infinite responsibility for more than one Other? Which Other should receive priority? What if one Other engages in conflict with another? Can the I protect one Other from an attack by another? If so, is the ego justified in using violence or even killing another to defend the other?

Peperzak, Atterton, and Simmons, as we have seen, presented their objections in a very dramatic way. Unfortunately, none of them attempted to

provide answers. The problem remains unresolved to this day. Although Simmons tried to explain that the third party is simply an infinite other, he too faces difficulties. For Levinas, particularly in his later works, the third party is different from the Other and is not merely his fellow. Burggraeve (1981, 36) attempts to answer some of these questions by stating that when we encounter another person's bare face (nakedness), we are confronted with all Others, each equally in need of our help as the person standing before us. We can no longer prioritize those closest to us; we must direct our attention to everyone. However, Simmons (1999) responded that a direct, face-to-face relationship with every individual in humanity is impossible. Instead, Simmons suggests that those who are far away can only be engaged with through indirect means.

This dilemma raises the issue of ethical primacy: which obligation should be prioritized when faced with competing claims from multiple Others? Which Other is my priority? Which Other should receive the most care? Who would I save first in an emergency? This becomes more problematic with the fact that there are so many Others in this world who need help. We cannot ignore this fact. There are numerous Others—the unheard, the voiceless, the non-faced, the poor, the stranger, the sick, the dying, the hungry, the thirsty—on the margins of society. Burggraeve (2002, 123) even pointed out that the notion of the third party includes future and unseen Others. They are all infinite Others in relation to me. But the problem is that we cannot infinitely respond to them all. It is impossible to do so.

Moreover, among Levinas scholars, it seems that the question of the ethical relation between the Other and the third party has not been given the proper attention it deserves. They have not come up with a clear response to this issue. They have also provided different interpretations, but none of them address the issue directly. As discussed earlier, the Other, from Levinas's point of view, holds primacy over me, so it follows that the third party, the other Others, is also superior to me. The third party also demands the same infinite responsibility from me. However, if the third party and the Other share equal footing, then the Other seems reducible to the same (totality). As a result, the ethical relation between the Other and the other Others becomes reciprocal, which, for Levinas, is impossible since the Other is infinite. And if the Other is infinite, there is no way to bridge the distance between the Other and the other Others (which is either concrete or infinite). Although, from Levinas's point of view, they are all infinite Others in relation to me.

This is exactly the point of this paper. Up until now, there have been no clear answers to the question regarding this relationship that Levinas has

failed to take into account. Responding infinitely to the Other is itself ethical. Responding to the many Others is, of course, ethical, which, for Levinas, leads to justice in the community. But we must take into account the problem of ethical primacy. It is here that Levinas's concept of infinite responsibility becomes problematic, because it is impossible to respond infinitely to all Others. In reality, people care most for their loved ones. People respond first to those they care for and love. It seems impossible that the "I" would choose the stranger over their family, friends, and loved ones.

To sum up, if the third party is also an infinite other, then there is no need for us to consider whether I am infinitely responsible for him/her. But again, for Levinas (1979, 35), the third party is other than the infinite Other and also a neighbor of the Other, not simply his or her fellow. Therefore, it is problematic to account for the ethical relation between the Other and the third party. The ethical relation between the Other and the third party in relation to me is very clear. I know my place: I am infinitely responsible for the Other and the third party. Levinas often cites Alyosha Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as an example to further explain his concept of infinite asymmetrical responsibility. Alyosha says: *"We are all responsible for everything and everyone in the face of everybody, and I more than the others."* However, Levinas has failed to address the ethical relation between the Other and the other Others (the third party). Levinas did not account for whether the Other holds the higher ethical ground over the other Others, who also call for justice.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Levinas's ethical philosophy insufficiently articulates the relational dynamics between the primary Other and secondary Others (the third party), thereby leaving critical questions about ethical primacy unresolved. Among Levinas scholars, it seems that there has been little serious treatment of this issue. Levinas is even criticized for being inconsistent with his views on the third party, as pointed out by Bernasconi. This paper has shown that this issue is often neglected among Levinas scholars. Since the question of whether the Other and the third party share equal footing has not received proper attention, the problem remains unanswered. One potential interpretive resolution emerging from this study is that Levinas's explicit notion of the third party might be redundant within his broader account of the asymmetrical I-Other relation, thereby suggesting a reconceptualization of ethical responsibility that inherently presupposes the presence of the many. The existence of the third party—the other Others, the presence of all humanity—is already presupposed when we encounter

the Other. In this sense, there is no need for us to account for the reality of the other Others. The fact that we encounter the Other implies that there are so many Others in this world. The notion of the third party somewhat obscures his account of the asymmetrical I-Other relation. Another possible solution, as mentioned earlier, is to interpret the third party as simply another infinite Other (in contrast to Levinas's claim that they are not just his fellow Other). In this sense, they share equal footing. Therefore, there is no need for us to question whether the Other holds primacy over the other Others (the third party), since they are both infinite others. Thus, we can conclude that in responding to the Other, we also respond to the other Others, and vice versa. As Jesus Christ states, *"whatever you have done for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done for me"* (Matthew 25:35-40). This passage might further explain Levinas's phenomenology of the third party.

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