

AN EXAMINATION OF LEVINAS' NOTION OF RESPONSIBILITY AND HUMAN SITUATION IN NIGERIA

Prof. Elijah Okon John

&

Godwin Adahada

Department of Philosophy, University of Uyo

PMB 1017, Uyo

Phone: 07032878732

Email: elijahjohn@uniuyo.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper examines Levinas' notion of responsibility and human situation in Nigeria. It aims at offering an exposition of Levinas' notion of responsibility with a view of juxtaposing it with the contemporary human situation as experienced in Nigeria. It offers a justification of responsibility as hospitality or solidarity with the human other. The face of the other is a face in need and it is an irreplaceable duty of the subject to respond to the needs of the other. This manner of responsibility deconstructs the Heideggerian notion of thrownness of man in the world. The paper is a concise introduction to Levinas' philosophy and his ethics in particular. Hence, it is relevant to those that are encountering him for the first time as well as a resource for Levinasian research. The contents capture phenomenology, ethics, existentialism, politics and Nigerian current affairs. These offer a wide range of knowledge to its readers. The paper employs analysis of notions and concepts as well as their interpretation. This paper adds to the existing studies on Levinas as well as offers alternative to government duties in lieu of human welfare in Nigeria.

Keywords: Responsibility, Emmanuel Levinas, Leadership, Human Nature, Levinas' Responsibility.

Introduction

Human life in a world is characterized for polarity of human situations or predicaments. Though opposite or contradictory conditions seem to be banal natural, but they are further deepened by human-created situations. Some existentialist philosophers tell us that man, a bundle of possibilities is a being-with; and the social sciences tell us that man is a social being. The two ideas imply social life in all its entailments. Living in the society involves peoples of unequal capacities; economic, social, political etc. but they must coexist. Their coexistence reveals the strength and weakness of each in coping with realities of life. Obviously, all are not the same. Whereas some are wealthy others are wretched. Therefore, the wealthy must come to the assistance of the poor ones in their needs. The assistance in question is underscores Levinas' notion of responsibility.

In Emmanuel Levinas' notion of responsibility, the wealthy and powerful, are referred to them as the "Subject /I"; the poor and weak ones, are called the "Other". Levinas' notion of responsibility does not bear out the ordinary meaning. Thus, by responsibility, he means that everyone is made to serve the Other and that one's life is meaningful in his service for the Other. Specifically, he advances "I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity...I understand responsibility as responsibility for the other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed"(Levinas,*Ethics*,95). On this Levinas' thought, Sean Hand

comments: “His post rational ethics stands as the ultimate and exemplary challenge to the solitude of Being, a rigorous testimony of one's infinite obligation to the other person” (v). Hand eulogizes Levinas' novelty in constructing heteronomous ethics of solidarity for the otherness. Against the idea that one is alone, Levinas demonstrates that we are for oneanother.

We are all responsible for everyone every time, everywhere and in all things. Levinas is assertive about this. Responsibility is the emblem of his thought. Being so passionate with and being responsible for everyone, “we are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others” (Dostoyevsky, 264), becomes one of Levinas' favorite quotes. This quote can be re-rendered as 'we are all responsible for everyone, but I am more responsible than all others'. This quote already points to the trajectory of Levinas' notion of responsibility. Man is a responding being whose powers precedes and exceeds the egoistic tyranny of ontology. It is in this sense that Levinas defines responding subject as always available and sufficient to answer to everyone and in everything, and responsibility as that which is natural to human being. Levinas' notion of responsibility is an advocacy for better human situation.

The human situation in Nigeria could be described in the Heideggerian “thrownness”. This explains that Nigerians are seemingly left to fate because of the current realities. As Levinas' notion of responsibility is a response to Heideggerian thrownness, its relevance to the Nigerian situation bears out. There is a wide divide between the class of I/subject and Other. Everyone that could be likened as the I/subject seems to be in his comfortable zone and minding less of what becomes of the Other. This experience descends from the highest echelon of government to the lowest. Institutions and government agencies are not left out. Private individuals also seem to care less about the poor masses. A close investigation reveals the absence of responsibility as Levinas espouses. This essay reveals and argues that Levinas' notion of responsibility is a clarion call for hospitality and solidarity to the those in the “Other” class by those in the “I/subject” class. To unpack this, this essay proceeds as follows: Section 2 introduces Emmanuel Levinas; Section 3 exposes Levinas' notion of responsibility; Section 4 investigates the human situation in Nigeria; Section 5 juxtaposes Levinas' notion of responsibility and human situation in Nigeria; Section 6 makes a case for Levinas' notion of responsibility as an advocacy for better human situation in Nigeria; Section 7 evaluates Levinas' notion of responsibility and section 8 concludes the contemporary Nigeria needs Levinas' notion of responsibility as a model for reorientation of thinking and acting to ensure better social, economic and political situation.

Introducing Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas was born on 12th January 1906, in Kaunas, Lithuania. He did his secondary school studies in Lithuania and Russia (Levinas, *Ethics*, viii). In 1914, in the wake of the World War I, Levinas' family emigrated to Karkhov, in the Ukraine and returned two years after the war to Lithuania in 1920. In 1923, Levinas went to study in Strasbourg in France. He studied philosophy along with Maurice Pradines, psychology with Charles Blondel and sociology with Maurice Halbwachs. However, he, met Maurice Blanchot and becomes a close friend. Between 1928 and 1929 Levinas studied with Edmund Husserl and was opportune to attend seminar of Martin Heidegger. At the completion of his studies Levinas publishes his thesis *La theorie de l'intuition dans la phenomenology de Husserl [The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's phenomenology]* (Levinas, *S.E.P.* 2). Levinas worked as a professor of philosophy, director of the Oriental Isrælite Normal School and professor in the University of Poitiers in 1964. In 1967, he worked as a professor in the University of Paris-Nanterre and in 1973, at the Sorbonne University (Levinas, *Ethics*, viii). Levinas continued with scholarly work on philosophy till about 1993. His

intellectual work aims at developing a first philosophy which for him is ethics. Ordinarily, ethics is classified as moral philosophy. In his literature, Levinas claims that his ethical construction is first philosophy because unlike the traditional first philosophy (metaphysics/ontology) that focuses on nature and things as they are, Levinas prioritizes and emphasizes man. Therefore, he claims that his ethics is first philosophy, for man doubles the subject and object of philosophical discourse. This claims also add to the novelty of his ethical reflections. For him, it is ethics, and this is his philosophical preoccupation. Levinas has several publications including *Totaliteetinfini: essai sur l'exteriorite* [*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*] in 1961 and *Autrement qu'etre ou au- dela de l'essence* [*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*], his first and second great philosophical works, respectively.

An Exposition of Levinas' Notion of Responsibility

Levinas' ethics suggests absolute, unlimited, unconditional and non-reciprocal responsibility for the other (Levinas *Totality*, 215; Levinas *Otherwise* 55; Levinas *Ethics* 98). The Other is the beneficiary of the hospitality and solidarity of the subject/I. In his literature, Levinas uses capital 'O' in "Other" to designate all "human Other" and small 'o' "other" for nonhuman other. We apply the same in this piece. Levinas describes the Other always as weak, vulnerable, needing help, fragile, etc. One thinks that this assumption is to attract responsibility of the Subject who he constructs as always strong and always abundant with all it takes to care for the Other.

The other enjoys the responsibility from the subject. He is any person who is not the subject. He is an absolute other that cannot be subsumed into the subject (Levinas, *Totality*, 39). The subject on the other hand, is the one that always responds, cares for and takes responsibility for the other. In this ethics, Levinas constructs the other as a face and describes it as "nudity and poverty" (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 89), vulnerable and needing help and protection (Levinas, *Totality*, 275). One thinks that this description is an assumption used by Levinas to bear out his ethics of responsibility because every other cannot always fit into his description. By the face, he means the total expression of the other, and by nudity, he means that the face of the other conceals nothing. 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 of which the height is murder. For this reason, Levinas denounces and condemns murder and claims that the nakedness of the other's face resists murder, "murder already resists us in his face, in his face is the primordial expression, "you shall not commit murder"" (Levinas, *Totality*, 199). The prohibition of murder is binding on all and on the flip side, he asserts responsibility. Levinas declares: "the face orders and ordains me [for responsibility]" (Levinas, *Ethics* 97). Responsibility is an opposed virtue to murder. Elsewhere, Levinas puts forward that the otherness of the Other is the highest expression of the imperative "thou shalt not kill" (Levinas *Otherwise* 109; Levinas *Ethics* 87). Since the face of the Other resists murder, murder, therefore, 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' 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 (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.

In his ethics of responsibility, Levinas conceptualizes that every ethical relationship starts with a face-to-face encounter between the I and the Other (Levinas, *Totality*, 203). In this relationship, he is circumspect of the absolute otherness of the Other and defends it. The Other is

absolute and so, she cannot be assimilated into the subject. The defense of the other and her priority occupies greater portion of Levinas' ethical literature. Evidently, Levinas devotes the *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* for this purpose. 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). By this avowal, Levinas calls to question all sorts of negligence, indifference and deafness to the welfare of the other. To this effect, he conceptualizes the responsibility for the Other as absolute, unconditional and infinite, justifying in specificity that one should do the even what is challenging for the wellbeing of the other (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 55). Responsibility for the other is so important to Levinas that he holds the subject as being obsessed to the point of substituting himself for the other's very responsibility and becoming a hostage for him (Levinas, *Ethics*, 100). Levinas claims that the subject must respond to the other herself because he (the subject) is the only one available to assume the responsibility which is not transferable (Levinas, *Ethics*, 100). The I must respond to the other by herself and should not be deterred by the challenges which may be encountered in the discharge of responsibility. He justifies it by stating that "the exposure to another is disinterestedness, proximity, obsession by the neighbor an obsession despite oneself, that is, a pain" (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 55). The foregoing shows that Levinas acknowledges the inconveniences of the hyperbolic conception of his ethics and on these difficulties lies the ethical imports of responsibility.

Levinas' ethics represents a novel and radical reversal of the preoccupation of Western philosophy. Its concern about nature is reversed 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. It is for this reason that some commentators have alleged that Levinas' ethics could be read as a reaction to the totalizing nature of the Western philosophical tradition. Llewelyn points out that Levinas' philosophy engages the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger from a different perspective (Llewelyn, 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' ethics of responsibility unfolds an asymmetry between two disparate persons, the I and the Other. The Other approaches 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 which the I should not expect. On this, Levinas argues that the asymmetrical responsibility defines the subject - Other relationship "the intersubjective relation is non-asymmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the other without waiting for reciprocity" (Levinas, *Ethics*, 98). Again, non-reciprocal relationship characterizes subjectivity which Levinas extols as ethical. For him, the Other is frail and needy and on our ability to respond to the Others' need lies the ethical. Elsewhere, Levinas emphasizes responsibility as asymmetry: "My position as I consist in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the other" (Levinas, *Totality*, 215). Absolute and unconditional, infinite and asymmetrical responsibility for the Other are essential ingredients of Levinas' ethics. Levinas avers that "since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regards; his responsibility is *incumbent on me*.... I am responsible for his very responsibility" (Levinas, *Ethics*, 96). For the subject, this notion of responsibility entails selflessness as well as upholds human dignity and welfare, solidarity and friendship.

Levinas' vision of responsibility vouches for infinite response. He explicitly declares: "The more I answer, the more I am responsible; the more I approach the neighbor with which I am in charged the further away I am. This debt which increases is infinity as an infinitude of the

infinite”, (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 93). This position captures the infinite responsibility that he espouses. It is an explicit duty of the subject to fulfil this prescription. I think that Levinas purposely invests his ethical subject/I with some hyperbolic qualities that could be described as virility, abundance and availability to justify the responsibility he reposes on them. These features come to bear in the subject's relationship with the Other. On the other hand, the Other is vested with the opposite characteristics such as fragility, vulnerability, as a needy and destitute. Despite being vulnerable, fragile and destitute, the Other is an absolute and inassimilable. This means that even in his destitute and vulnerable condition, the I is unable to absorb the Other into himself in the course of their relationship although the I sees him, the Other cannot be touched because he eludes the grasp of the I. Asking how the Other cannot be assimilated, Levinas argues that the Other and the I are asymmetrical. The 'height' is the designation of all possible and conceivable differences. This means that whereas the subject is at the service of the Other, the Other is not obligated to reciprocate. Levinas' argument is that the only relationship that the I and the Other have in common is that of responsibility towards the Other. It is precisely this asymmetry that qualifies responsibility as ethical. One could wonder if such relationship is possible and how it originated.

Levinas claims that between the subject and the other, the other is prioritized to the self. He claims that the relationship with the other is primordial and comes before the relationship to the self: “the relationship with non-ego precedes any relationship of the ego with itself” (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 119). Levinas makes frantic effort to defend this view by arguing that relating and caring for the other person precede self-love. His argument is a critique of all subjects as he accuses them of the banal attitude of inverting the attention and care that is the Other's to themselves and manipulating resources that should first be at the services of the Other. His reason for this criticism is that relationship even communication would not be possible with oneself without the epiphany of the Other and therefore the Other must likewise be prioritized to the self. He claims communication or any other act of relation with the other must be culminated in responsibility for the other, otherwise it remains incomplete (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 119). This position is a strong claim. Levinas has forwarded reason in supports of it despite not being uncritical. The notion of responsibility forwarded by Levinas assumes a pedestal in this essay to investigate the human situation in Nigerian.

Human Situation in Nigeria

A situation is a set of circumstances in which an individual/people find(s) himself/themselves. By human situation in Nigeria, we mean the current political, economic, social, human state of affairs. The current situation is defined by much hardship and less wellbeing. The hardship permeates every aspect of human lives, affects interpersonal relationship and general wellbeing. This is an overview of the human situation in Nigerian. Rightly described, “*The Human Condition* is crammed with distinctions: between labor, work, and action; between power, violence, and strength, between the earth and the world; between property and wealth; and many more, often established through etymological explorations” (Arendt, vii). *The Human Condition* doubles the title of Arendt's work but also our preoccupation in this essay. The contents of the work offers a criticism of modern society as well as a kind of prolegomena to a more systematic work of political theory. Arendt's separation of labor (manual works, mostly domestic and unskilled farm work) and work (works with tools as in factories) from action (political offices) underlie the entirety of human situation. She claims that these three activities are fundamental to human life and so are constitutive of the human condition. (Arendt, ix). These three activities, I

think, are relevant in our context as the basis of the contemporary Nigerian situation. Before immersing into the contemporary situation of the Nigerians, an outline of the provision of the Constitution is insightful.

The Nigerian Constitution vouches for the good of her citizens. It declares to be “in the public interest and for the purpose of promoting the security, welfare, and good governance and fostering the unity and progress of the people of Nigeria...” (CFRN, C23-1), It further outlines specific fundamental objectives and direct principles of State policy in Chapter 2, sections 13- 24 as follows: The fundamental obligations of the government, the government and the people, political objectives, economic objectives, social objectives, educational objectives, foreign policy objectives, environmental objectives, directives on Nigerian cultures, obligation of the mass media, national ethics, and duties of the citizen (CFRN, C23-3). These provisions should offer enabling environment for human flourishing and serve as a pivot round which the human situation in Nigeria should revolve. These should be an irreplaceable duty of government to achieve. Furthermore, these objectives are complemented by the fundamental human rights of the citizens as enshrined in the national constitution: Right to life; right to dignity of human person; right to personal liberty; right to fair hearing; right to private and family life; right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; right to freedom of expression and press, right to peaceful assembly and association; right to freedom of movement; right to freedom from discrimination; right to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria (CFRN, C23-3). Although these rights are already enshrined in the United Nations Charter, its enshrinement in the national Constitution should ensure better experience. If the government successfully accomplishes her duties, the right and wellbeing of the citizens would be defended. This is clearly stated as “the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government” (CFRN, C23-22). With this declaration, I turn to the actual human situation in Nigeria.

The current hardship has in the first instance, impacted positively. Majority of Nigerians have learned to be creative, resilient and improvising. Firstly, resilience describes the ability of some Nigerians to make good out of the current woes. This means that some struggle to recover from the tough realities of the times through their personal efforts. Resilience cannot be separated from the ability to “improvise”; therefore, improvisation is a direct expression of resilience. By this token, many have been able to create varieties of job opportunities for themselves and others. A case in point is one that struggles against the harsh economic realities to create a more lucrative business than his normal work that is less lucrative. Asked what inspired him, he avers: “You have to ask yourself; how do you avoid a situation where things collapse, or if things are collapsing around you, how do you try to insulate yourself from that” (Lamble)? This reason expresses the current situation and points to creativity as a way out of the odds. It is this same creative power that sustains majority of the masses.

The second aspect of the contemporary Nigerian situation complacency. It explains an uncritical wellness and satisfaction about one's plight and situation. This is not so positive because in the midst of multiple challenges and crises many Nigerians conduct themselves as if everything was going well. This attitude is observed in public and private instances; political, social, economic, even in security situation. Frustrated at this null satisfaction, Sagay complains: “We are far from being a caring society, and many of us prove to be moral cowards when confronted with truth and injustice, and self-indulgent to the point of complacency, when our personal interests are threatened; and this blinds us to the needs of others in society, and the consequences of our failure to act”. Sometimes, the complacency can be very frustrating but a cursory reflection into it reveals that it serves as a “coping behavior” for some people because it is

difficult for persons or group of persons make themselves heard with the appropriate reaction from the government.

These actors on the side of “coping behavior are the masses” because their voices cannot be heard. On the flip side are the political elites and the wealthy. Taking a swipe on them, (Sagay) forwards, “A lot of our societal problems would be non-existent, were we given more to contentment, instead of being hedonistically complacent. And those most guilty of this national malaise, are the so-called, self-anointed achievers in our society men such as these, who exercise influence without moral authority”. We infer two classes of complacent Nigerians stand out: First, the poor and uninfluential masses; and second, the influential minority. Whereas the masses concede to complacency out of frustration, the influential ones give into it for convenience and egoistic security. It is the former that this piece seeks to highlight.

The complacency of the masses expresses helplessness. This is characteristic of some youth indicted for not being involved like in other democracies: “Sadly, the contemporary Nigerian youths are missing in many national debates and cannot stage interventions on the challenges that bedevil the country. This is a far cry from the critical role that the youths played in many socio-political issues that defined and shaped the history of the Nigerian state. They have failed to challenge their leaders to do what is right in saving the soul of the dying nation” (Sagay). This last point, namely, that Nigeria is a democratic state begs for more clarification for, Nigerian democracy parallels none in the committee of truly democratic states. Whereas democratic governments pay attention and act promptly on the demands of the people, the case is different in Nigeria but more of suffering. Nigeria's democracy could best be described as neo colonization, whereas majority of her leaders are detectors. Democratic approach seems to be completely silent whereas the *privilege rulers* are egoistic. This scenario recalls one of the popular music of the Nigerian Afro-beat musician, FelaKuti, *suffering and smiling*. In it Fela highlights various conditions of “suffering and smiling” including assault on the road by security agents, poverty and lack of amenities in the homes, poor and crowdy means of transportation, poor work conditions but little remuneration etc. However, all these instances of suffering are followed with “smiling”. While those on the high places are enjoying, the masses are subjected to untold hardship. When Fela aired this music, the situation was not degenerating as it currently is. Could we understand his music as visionary? The “smiling” in the suffering situation is negative. What follows are other negative situations.

Anarchy may not sufficiently describe the current situation. There appears to be confusion everywhere. The political elites seem to be overwhelmed by confusion, whereas the citizenry feel betrayed by the leaders in government. There are litanies of unanswered questions amidst the political imbroglio, economic adversity and series of preventable tragedies. A seemingly synopsis is represented by the following

Nigeria is confronted by multiple security challenges, notably the resilient Boko Haram Islamist insurgency in the northeast, long-running discontentment and militancy in the Niger Delta, increasing violence between herders and farming communities spreading from the central belt southward, and separatist Biafra agitation in the Igbo southeast. Violence, particularly by the Boko Haram insurgency, has displaced more than two million people, created a massive humanitarian crisis, and prompted the rise of civilian vigilante self-defense groups that pose new policy dilemmas and possible security risks (International Crisis Group). This is the pathetic situation of contemporary Nigeria society (at least for the last decade). The security challenges deal a multiplier effect on all

aspects of life of the nation including the death tolls. Elsewhere, the human situation in Nigeria receives a bleak assessment.

A weakening economy, rising insecurity and violent conflicts threaten progress made in its democratic development. Amid deepening distrust in government and institutions” (United States Institute of Peace). Distrust in the government and her institutions is crucial to the situation as noted above. Distrust arises from the perceived government inactions or incommensurate actions or reaction to obvious problems that could have been handled more proactively and effectively for the interest of the nation. The insecurity is a case in point and government's *soft* reaction and avoidance to name them as “terrorists” all those perpetrating in the odious act appears permissive to the actors and betraying to the nation. This scenario has aggravated and deepened the citizen's suspicion against her.

Furthermore, the spread of insecurity within the country is unlimited. A “BBC News” report notes that “Nigeria is faced with an unprecedented wave of different but overlapping security crises - from kidnapping to extremist insurgencies - almost every corner of the country has been hit by violence and crime” (Tanko). It becomes necessary at this juncture to itemize these evils that ranges from: Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, herders' clashes with farmers, wild wave of kidnapping, armed robbery. These evils have threatened not only the existence of Nigeria as a nation but also the survival of Nigerians. Thus, it amounts to a failure in government's foremost responsibility to her citizens. This claim is further confirmed thus, “the scale of the insecurity threatens the very fabric of Nigerian society: “With every attack, human lives are lost or permanently damaged and faith in democracy and the country is diminishing” (Tanko). Under this insecurity, several students from different school; both secondary and tertiary have been kidnapped, while some have been killed in the process, others have been freed with a ransom after abuses and others are still in captivity. Travelers on the highways do not feel safe, churches and mosques have been attacked. What is more disturbing is consistent attack on security personnel and their formation of which the latest is the attack on the Nigerian Defense Academy, Kaduna and Sokoto. This is most disturbing, shameful and suspicious in the sense that one could unmistakably assume that it points to a conspiracy among the security personnel/high profile politicians themselves considering the nature of this formation. The security challenges of the country are hydra-headed, and point out accusing fingers at the authorities. Closely connected to insecurity situation are the twin ills: human right abuse, famine and inflation.

Abuses of human rights triggered on an emblematic protest, “End SARS protest” which started on October 14, 2020. This protest as I think was a reaction not only to human right abuses by some of the security personnel but, indeed, to malgovernance - the current situation. Human Right Watch described the situation as “National protests calling on authorities to end police brutality and abolish an abusive police unit known as the special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)” (Human Right Watch). But Nigerians experience more serious abuses in other sectors and institutions. The end SARS protest revealed massive corruption and insensitivity of some of the political leaders toward the masses at such a difficult time as hoarded COVID-19 relieve materials were uncovered. Akin to this revelation is the case that some of those that participated in the protest were arrested as well as those who protested the arrest of the protesters. On the other hand, food crisis is caused by 1) attack on the farmers and fear of attack by the terrorists and herdsman, and 2) destruction of crop farms by the devilish herdsman. These two factors hinder normal farm work. This is a colossal failure of government's foremost duty to her citizens.

Another troubling current human situation is the condition of workers. Majority of Nigerian workers' salaries are not paid promptly. This anomaly goes against the secular and

ecclesiastical laws, hence, defiles the fundamental human right of labor contract. Ecclesiastically, Pope Leo xiii in his *RerumNovarum* deliberates on the ideal relationship of mutuality between labour and capital. He states:

It is surely undeniable that, when a man engages in remunerative labor, the impelling reason and motive of his work is to obtain property, and thereafter to hold it as his very own. If one man hires out to another his strength or skill, he does so for the purpose of receiving in return what is necessary for the satisfaction of his needs...(RN § 5).

The current workers situation is in opposition to the Papal vision of work relationship. Poor work condition, poor remuneration, lack of prompt payment of salaries and other entitlements characterize majority Nigeria's employers and employees. The Pope suggests "that some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and the wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class" (RN § 3). *RerumNovarum* supports labor unionism [perhaps as a pressure group to advance her demands to the employer]. This is the heart of the Catholic Social Teaching. Complementary to it is the *LaboremExercens* of Pope John Paul 11, which insists on just wages and enabling working conditions. Government inability to live up to this expectation has resulted to series of strike actions by different labor bodies at different times. These two are but example of ecclesiastical magisterium concern for workers which seem to be directly addressed to the contemporary Nigerian workers. The above insight of the human situation in Nigeria offers us resources which Levinas' notion of responsibility can be juxtaposed.

Levinas' Notion of Responsibility and Human Situation in Nigeria

As a recap of Levinas' notion of responsibility must be understood as a characteristic of an individual. He argues that responsibility is the essence of an individual. Against the usual understanding of responsibility as that which one undertakes as outcomes of one's actions or that which concerns oneself, in Levinas' notion, responsibility is for what does not concern oneself. It is selfless, exogenous, heteronomous and without a recourse to the self. On the contrary, relationship or responsibility in the contemporary Nigerian situation is different. We think that our experience of responsibility is greatly opposed to Levinas' notion. For, it is seemingly mostly characterized by totalizing tendencies. Thus, this totalization appears to be intentional by the subject/I, thereby assimilating the Other. Such subjects are totalizers and fit Levinas' description

The totalizers who are satisfied with themselves and with the systems they can organize around themselves as they already are. A very different answer is given by those who are satisfied, and who strived for what is other than themselves, the infinitizers, as we may call them. The former seeks for power and control; the latter for a higher quality of life. The former strive for order and system; the later for freedom and creative advance(Levinas, *Totality*, 17).

The subjects are the totalizers and the others are the infinitizers. This explanation offers worldviews of the duo by stating their tendencies and attitude to life in their lived situations. One thing so certain is that they are opposed to each other as it is shown by their attitude to life. In the previous section (4), we highlighted two classes of complacent people: first, the masses that are not influential and second, the powerful, wealthy influential people. Though the masses are complacent, their complacency is indifference in the sense that they believe they cannot provoke government's reaction in favor of their position. This may not be true, but this is exactly what they

believe and so, they withhold any positive actions toward this. They are at the mercies of the policy makers, they are the infinitizers. On the contrary, the second class are the few minorities but wealthy, powerful and influential. They control the policies and manipulate them to their favor. They are always comfortable and in their selfish comfort, they remain hedonistically complacent. This class are the totalizers.

Totalizers are bereft of the idea of the absolute Otherness. They are erotic – all of their actions are engendered to self-return. This attitude parallels the behavior and practice of majority of contemporary Nigerian politicians. Political/ leadership ideally is for services on behalf of the people but really, the contemporary Nigerian political realities almost contradicts this truism and proves otherwise - it is for self-aggrandizement. This point is succinctly captured by Falolawho described some political elites political ambitions: “It was no longer how a group of nationalists from different parts of the country would govern and bring progress, but how the representatives of the component units would share power and resources” (148). A cursory assessment of contemporary Nigerian politicians will show that majority of them are bereft of the essence of Levinas' notion of responsibility. We are certain that Levinas will describe majority of the mas totalizers because they apparently recolonize their fellow citizens. What is more puzzling is that the notion of responsibility that Levinas advances is addressed to *ordinary* people. Ordinary in the sense that he was not addressing specifically public office holders or people on leadership position or people with mandate to serve others. No! Levinas was constructing it as ordinary daily interpersonal relation of one and another – in search of the ethical way of life, responsibility. Violation of responsibility by mandated leaders increases the gravity of its evil. The quest for control of political power by certain politicians is intriguing and complicated. For some it is a matter of compensation and strategy over what they could describe as past privation. Mustafa cleverly justifies political power monopoly by Northern politicians as a strategy and compensation over what he describes as deprivation of human capital which is a privilege abundant and prevalent in the South. He claims that the North decided to hold onto political capital because of their number. That is why the Northern youth obviously make an option for politics and business over education (275).

This offers plausible insight to the political climate of contemporary Nigeria and rudiments for assessing and re-writing our political theory. Suffice to mention that this view expresses hubris, misrepresentation, misunderstanding and the injustice prevalent among some fortunate Nigerian political elites. The mainstream of this work and this section peruses the contemporary Nigerian situation with the lens of Levinas' notion of responsibility. The following appraisal offers the applicability of responsibility to the current realities in Nigeria and creates a nexus for juxtaposition:

When Levinas' work is employed to identify and redress social, political, and economic injustices, when it is invoked as calling us for a new respect for alterity, difference, diversity, or simply “the other”, when it is cited as a way to rethink the ethical dimension of the relationship between teachers and student, care givers and patients, judges and defendants, when it is appealed to by a host of disciplines, from psychology and sociology to literary theory and communication studies as they make the “turn to ethics,” it is well-nigh impossible to read these invocations as having nothing to do with normative ethical concerns...it is this ethical stance that captured readers' attention (Perpich,125).

The above synopsis draws attention to the various aspects of the human situation of Nigerians that Levinas' notion of responsibility has relevance for. The question of injustice is the bane of

Nigeria's problem; socially, politically, economically, in the labor market, in the various professions. Injustice is banal. Injustice in the health sector, in the academic, in the general political administration. In all these, the subject has remained insensitive to the plight of the Other. The subject assumes the position of the complacent influential I and wallows in hedonistic and egoistic self-aggrandizement contrary to their mandate of service. Political leadership is constituted for service. Effective leadership must be reposed on requisite leadership prowess and human values. Unfortunately, this seems to be lacking in our current dispensation which makes Kirk-Greene, *et al* suggest that the solution to Nigeria's democratic problem is accountability. A government with sound administrative principles especially, accountability would unleash the dividends of democracy on the people. He however, noted that poor governance has caused lack of confidence of the people in the political process. Similarly, Nelson and Quick note that decision making is vital to holistic prosperity and that dysfunctional legal systems that fails the right of individuals and groups is an open invitation to insecurity and anarchy. These two instances among others make sense of the current Nigerian situation. Furthermore, Ejimabo rightly observes that one of the most controversial ills and protagonist of Nigeria's tragic situation is:

In Nigeria, the decision-making process somehow is believed to belong only to a special interest group of people. The process of decision making is in the hands of powerful and influential leaders and politicians, who control and manipulate the justice system in the country to suit their special and individual interests (11).

In Levinas' register, Ejimabo is referring to the totalizers. A catchy Levinasian remarks on the current Nigerian situation is lack of responsibility.

Levinas' Notion of Responsibility: An Advocacy for Better Human Situation

Levinas' notion of responsibility obviously advocates better human situation. This is evident in his controversial but compelling solicitation for responsibility that is expressed as sensitivity to the situation of the Other, hospitality to, and solidarity with the Other. The basis of this advocacy is implied in the definition of the I/subject as answering for everything and for everyone (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 114). Levinas' style of answering is absolutely to avoid assimilation of the Other by the I; Infinitely, to ensure satisfaction of the Other and unconditionally and asymmetrically to prioritize the Other to the I. The priority of the Other to the self obviously demonstrate his intention. This solicitation compellingly espouses better human situation for the Other. It also endorses his claims that relationship with the other is prior to that of the self (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 119). The Other is the mirror which the I sees himself.

In the opening page of his opus magnum, Levinas makes a skeptical and suspicious statement: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (Levinas, *Totality*, 21). Hubris incline some subject to be skeptical of morality or about who can be moral or why we should be moral at all. Some think that morality is for the weak and the docile. Moral skepticism adds to the ills of our time. These skeptical and suspicious tendencies are quite un-Levinasian. Responsibility in Levinas gathers the force of moral conscience, that is why Levinas appeals for it as a duty. As the subject, the benefactor is an 'other' to the beneficiary. There involves here the idea of substitution. The wealthy, the leaders must substitute themselves for the Others.

Substitution essentially involves assuming the duty/situation of another. Responsibility,

therefore, is essentially a substitution. A substitute answers for the Other, to make better the poor condition of the Other. "I am an 'other'," but this is not an alienation ... Impassively undergoing the weight of the other, (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 118). Substitution aims at improving the Other's situation through an assumed responsibility. The substitute is inspired by his moral intuition that moves him to hospitality and solidarity toward the Other. In Levinas, the movement of the subject toward the Other is transcendence. This transcendence is substitution in as much as the subject sets out to accomplish some tasks to improve the situation of the Other. The current Nigerian situation begs for this sense of transcendence and substitution to better human situation. To respond to the Other is our natural invocation in situations where the Other is incapacitated and self-insufficient. To better his situation, the I, the irreplaceable must respond as his *substitute* (this must be understood within the context and bounds of Levinas' registers). Every act of substitution is sacrificial, and the sacrifice ends in solidarity. It is this sacrificial act that bears out the responsibility for the Other. The wealthy Nigerian must understand Levinas' call for substitution as a call to better their human situation. The political leaders and all must understand responsibility as substitution. As noted, before if Levinas so vouched for responsibility from ordinary members of the society, his expectation from constituted and mandated leaders is left to be imagined. Solidarity with one another is a response to our natural call, Levinas would claim. Levinas will decline and object to the view that human nature is egoistic since he defends that relationship with the Other is prior the relationship with the self. Although a controversial position to hold to but this serves responsibility so far as to create a better human situation.

Levinas is an advocate of heteronomy because his responsibility construct assign a priority place for the other. He also defends that one defines oneself in the context of the Other. Since one defines and realizes oneself in heteronomy, one has a duty in strengthening its bond. This ethical invocation is a *sine qua non* to the contemporary Nigeria if human situation must improve. Doing this means to uphold the wellbeing of the other, the neighbor through solidarity and charity: "If I am alone with the other, I owe him everything... Do I know if someone else has an understanding with him or his victim" (Levinas, *Ethics*, 90)? Heteronomy calls for hospitality that extends to a greater number of people, yet responsibility remains irreplaceable. Certain dynamics are in operation here; firstly, this underscores the heteronomous dimension of responsibility within the utilitarian perspective, namely, satisfying the greater number possible lies the value. Second, that responsibility, substitution is not transferable since the "current" subject does not know any other available subject neither does he know if the Other understand him. Thirdly, extending good relations from *one Other* to *many Others* means justice and this relationship among people is the advocacy at issue- that which can ensure better human situation among all or at least among the greater majority of people. Individuals as well as institutions must uphold this advocacy toward this relationship to ensure justice and consequently better human situation. A cry for justice is not faceless. As the face bears the total expression of the Other, his looks is significant. (Levinas, *Totality*, 215).

The duty of subjects to heed to the invitation of the face and the *voco* of responsibility by the cry of the vulnerable ones is at issue. To hear the destitution of the Other, to be gazed on by the Other are hypothetical expression and a means to an end, namely solicitation of better human condition. This is the crux of Levinas' notion of responsibility. This advocacy is most relevant to the current Nigerian situation because hedonistic complacency among the comfortable class has increased insensitivity, lack of hospitality and solidarity toward the Other who need help. The novelty of Levinas' ethics in theorizing responsibility is particularly attractive to commentators. As previously noted, Diane Perpich made sense of Levinas' ethics of responsibility as being relevant for resolving of multifaceted injustice such as is prevalent in the contemporary Nigeria.

If Levinas' notion of responsibility is applied and adhered to in the different sectors, it will lead to Robert Bernasconi's view, namely, reorientation of thinking and action and hence, a better experience of people-oriented relationship which inevitably inspire human values in our society (250). The most urgently needed values in the current situation are those presented by responsibility: hospitality and solidarity among others. As orientation and reorientation are necessary moments in the human existence and that of a nation, this responsibility is instrumental to it. Thus, thinking would remain passively in the mind if its results were not concretized in actions. Better human condition is achievable through the practical experience of Levinas' responsibility.

Assessment of Levinas' Notion of Responsibility

Levinas is neither very assertive nor vocal about his intentions of constructing or prescribing an ethical system. He did not even concede to doing ethics. All he said is that he was indulging in “first philosophy” – searching for the conditions or what it means to be ethical. One could quickly add that responsibility takes a front position in that preoccupation. In the just concluded section (6) Robert Bernasconi, an ardent editor and commentator on Levinas' works avers that Levinas aims at reorientation of human thinking for better experience of ethical life. Diane Perpich notes that “Bernasconi's remarks suggest that if Levinas' notion of responsibility has no practical impact, that is if it does not change the way we see ourselves or the situations we confront, then there is little point invoking his work as a fundamental investigation into something vaguely called “the ethical”” (125-6). Both Bernasconi and Perpich are saying the same thing. Basically, no one does the same thing and gets a different result at various times. Like in every other system, rules, norms and practices, lifestyles must change if new outcomes are expected. This is the same expectation regarding responsibility. Since reorientation is the goal of Levinas' responsibility, if this carried out, then the result could bear out. Levinas has advanced a compelling and robust but controversial and challenging notion. It is only expedient to appreciate it by means of evaluation.

Ethics traditionally understood in the history of philosophy is concerned with the deontological and consequentialist ethical theories. Levinas notion of responsibility, most commentators, including Robert Bernasconi and Jacques Derrida classify as ethics. However, Levinas himself calls it first philosophy. He claims to be searching for the possibility of what is ethical. Ciaramelli noted that “Levinas does not treat ethics as one branch of philosophy among others” (85). Reckoned as ethics and being neither ontological nor consequential ethics, Levinas accomplishes a novelty in philosophy by constructing a complement to the traditional ethical theories.

The use of assumptions and images are tools at the disposal of theorists. Levinas showcases this proficiency in his style of writing. The mainstream of his philosophy – the “I/Subject” and the “Other” are excellent and thoughtful formulations that bear out his thoughts. Akin to assumptions are the images. For instance, Levinas expresses and characterizes the Other as the “poor”, the “orphan”, the “widow”, the “stranger” and the “destitute”. Evidently, these appear to be the class of people that economically, socially, sometimes, physically fragile and thus, needing help. Therefore, Levinas' use of assumptions and images are expressive and excellent. Assumptions and images are complemented by expressions.

“Absolute”, “unlimited”, “asymmetry”, “non-reciprocal” are common terms used in expressing and theorizing his notion of responsibility. Each of these concepts is loaded with meaning which is unpacked as follows: “Absolute” denotes that the Other that is being helped

cannot be assimilated by the I, the helper because each of them is a radical Other. “Unlimited” denotes the infinity which the subject is obligated to help the Other. “Asymmetry” and “non – reciprocal” imply that they are different. Asymmetry shows that the two are unequal in their respective circumstances. This “inequality” further entails non-reciprocity. In all, these concepts prioritize the Other and solicit hospitality and solidarity to his favor. These concepts, ordinary as they appear, imply the ethical import of responsibility.

Responsibility notion has been judged by some of Levinas' commentators as commanding normative force if it is not normative outrightly. For example, Diane Perpich notes “it is well-nigh impossible read these innovations as having nothing to do with normative ethical concern” (215). Elsewhere, Ciaramelli claims that Levinas does not attempt to construct a normative moral philosophy rather that his work is a search for the significance of ethics and the ethical (85). But arguing for Levinas work as ethics, some commentators declare “Levinas' work cannot provide us with what we normally think of as an ethics, namely, a theory of justice or an account of general rules, principles and procedures that will allow us to assess the acceptability of specific maxims or judgements relating to social actions, civic duty or whatever” (Critchley and Bernasconi 27). What this mean is that Levinas work has raised provocative and controversial questions in philosophy begging answers. On this lies the beauty and the importance of it as critical questions are more fundamental in philosophy than answers. Levinas has ejected new life into philosophy.

It is a sound and founded claim that Levinas' notion of responsibility is humanism in disguise. From its inception, Levinas argues that the concrete man rather than ontology should be the object of philosophy. With this objective, Levinas set out to deconstruct idealism and ontology and shifted the focus and emphasis of philosophy on the concrete existing man. Inspired by the terrible experience of the Second World War when the members of his family were exterminated and he, taken to captivity, Levinas devoted his thought and reflection on the wellbeing of alterity, for he and his fellow Jews suffered privation. Predicating his thoughts on his experience, he constructed practical philosophy and lays credence to concrete human situation. His is a philosophy predicated on lived situation.

Despite the plausible novelty occasioned by Levinas' work, there are nevertheless some controversial positions that call for a re-think. Firstly, plausible as the construction of the “I” and the “Other” is, their characterization is really worrisome. Granted that one can respond to the Others' needs and one can also be in need, it is difficult to concede uncritically to the fact that the “I” and the “Other” can always fit into these characterizations of infinite availability and answerability and infinite want.

Connected to this are the features of responsibility as “absolute”, “infinite”, “unconditional” and “non-reciprocal”. The absolute character of responsibility can be granted, for there are still some nice people. In what follows, infinite, unconditional and non-reciprocal responsibility cannot be accepted uncritically. Firstly, it is unpractical for one to respond unlimitedly to another even though such a subject has all needed resources at his disposal. Being disposed to answer to the Other is a huge problem in the Modern times. Secondly, human relationship in the contemporary times is reciprocal. One cannot always be at the receiving end. This view questions the unconditionality of responsibility. Furthermore, the Other, the poor, the destitute, stranger, orphan may not always be disposed to receive and may notreally be destitute as some widows and orphans are really wealthy. However, even though they are abject, they may sometimes want to give even from their meagre resources.

Every philosophy and philosopher has background influences so is Levinas. Levinas'

religious background influences incline some parts of his work as theology. Excessive use of Biblical and religious images and concepts, though they bear out his thoughts, seemingly liken his work to religious treatise. For example, the use of the weak ones: widow, orphans, strangers, these are people that the *Torah* protected from victimization. These images are found in the scripture (Jeremiah, chapter 7) and so are grounded in scriptural wisdom and Platonic thoughts. Anckert notes “by bringing particular concepts into universal ethical thought, Levinas wants to reshape philosophical thinking with Biblical wisdom” (97). Furthermore, repeated use of some theological terms like transubstantiation and incarnation, etc are banal.

The construction of the responsibility notion raises hope of welfare of the Other by the infinite generosity of the subject. The infinity that Levinas constantly and compellingly solicits casts his notion of responsibility to the realm of utopia. Specifically, “to give the other even the bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's own shoulders” (Levinas, *Otherwise*, 55), sounds impossible. This impossibility implies Utopia and a false hope of welfare. Levinas himself remarked that extreme responsibility as substitution is utopian of which one could be scandalized (*Ethics*, 100). What does he really mean?

The “height” and “asymmetry” have strong affinity in protecting the other. Levinas said that the subject cannot assimilate the Other because the other comes from a dimension of the height. “Height” is a condition of unknowability, untouchability and hence, unassimilability. Levinas has not explained how the subject will know the Other or the faculties that the subject would employ to respond to the Other as they belong to an asymmetrical world. The concept of the height ends up hindering both the possibility of knowledge and responsibility rather than protecting him from the totalizing tendency of the subject. But if he maintains it, he is sure to be involved in self-contradiction.

Conclusion

Levinas' notion of responsibility is explained in his ethics. However, his ethics is not understood in the traditional sense of formulation of principles, theories and norms as in the deontology and consequentialism. Levinas, rather constructs a novel complementary ethics in what he refers to as first philosophy. As first philosophy, his ethics is existential and practical and hence, focuses on the concrete human in his lived situation. As a reaction and a deconstruction of the Heideggerian views of the *thrownness* of man, Levinas formulated responsibility to reinstate man and assign him a place among other humans and to be cared for by them. The responsibility notion argues ferociously in favor of alterity and prioritizes him. Thus, Levinas is in search of what it means to be ethical and the conditions that uphold it. His philosophical construction is humanism in disguise. The originality of Levinas' philosophy lies in theorizing man in lived condition, the phenomenological encounter and inversion of ontology to ethics. He shows that contrary to Heideggerian claim that man is left to fate, that we are responsible for one another. We can say that this may be the reason he employs both philosophical and theological concepts and images to bear out his argument for the welfare of the other via responsibility. The notion of responsibility as observed is rich in its application. As noted by various commentators, whether his responsibility is viewed as provoking and adding normative force or soliciting reorientation of human behavior, the terminus *adquem* of it is to promote human welfare and flourishing.

The contemporary Nigerian situation is in dire need of Levinas' version of responsibility. Though Levinas does not particularly address the theme to political leaders, or leaders at all, but his notion of responsibility is a *sine qua non* to Nigeria's current scenario as it offers immense rudiments leadership. All leaders at all levels of governance, in the various institutions,

parastatals, in the church, and in the family can benefit from responsibility ethics. Change of attitude is prior to responding to the Other, therefore, as Bernasconi suggested, reorientation of thinking and behavior, is a prerequisite to experiencing priceless value of hospitality and solidarity offered by responsibility.

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