

LEVINAS' THEORY OF ALTERITY AND THE SKETCHING OF AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF OTHERNESS

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Abstract

This paper argues for an epistemology of otherness; an epistemology which pursues knowledge not just from the knower's perspective, but also from the known or object of knowledge or in a particular way, from the other person's view which is referred to in this paper as the other. It develops this thesis from the ethical Alterity of Emmanuel Levinas, which privileges the other over the self. This mirrors the postmodernist efforts which react against the linear and the objectivist outlook of traditional and classical philosophy. The outlook of traditional philosophy was largely individualistic. The implication of this according to Levinas is a philosophy shrouded in egoism and for epistemology, our grounds for knowledge claims could be partial or incomplete. An epistemology of otherness, therefore, argues for an intersubjectivist epistemology as an option that can produce a wholesome epistemic situation. It argues that deference to the other both as a source of knowledge and justification of our beliefs would produce more warranted grounds for knowledge. This paper concludes that this option would help diminish all forms of epistemic injustices and imbalances to our knowledge claims. This essay adopts an expository-analytical method in both shedding light on the ethics of intersubjectivity of Emmanuel Levinas and against this backdrop, advance an epistemology of otherness which this paper argues and

concludes can lead to knowing the other better and consequently, having a more inclusive epistemic situation.

Keywords: Otherness, intersubjective epistemology, the other, Alterity, Levinas

Introduction

In Book IV, Chapter 1 of Fyodor Dostoevsky's epic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, published in 1880, the Russian philosopher and existentialist writes "know, dear ones, that every one of us is undoubtedly responsible for all men and everything on earth, not merely through the general sinfulness of creation, but each one personally for all mankind and every individual man. This knowledge is the crown of life for the monk and for every man"¹ These talismanic lines mirror a philosophical tradition which characterizes the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. The philosophical tradition it represents is postmodernism. In philosophical terms, "postmodernism shares something with the critique of enlightenment values and truth-claims mounted by thinkers of a liberal-communitarian persuasion; also with neo-pragmatists like Richard Rorty, who welcome the end of philosophy's presumptive role as a privileged, truth-telling discourse."² Postmodernism came as a "reactionary" philosophy and maintains that there can be newer ways of doing things rather a linear pattern. As a movement, it is characterized by pluralism, scepticism, subjectivism or relativism and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology. This is in contrast to the linear way of doing philosophy in the era prior to it.

With postmodernism, western philosophy moved its frontiers from an individualized pattern of philosophy to newer ways that favour the social or 'the other' dimension. By a direct reference, it reacts to the individualism of modern western philosophy. From the Cartesian tradition, individualism characterized philosophical outlook. It is the individual that knows, thinks and acts. Hence, Rene Descartes' famous cliché, *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). For a long time in philosophy, 'other minds' constituted a problem, because of this individual

characterization of philosophy. From Descartes to Locke, Berkeley to Hume, Kant to Hegel, the subject of any philosophy was an individual. Individualism characterized modern philosophy. Individualism refers to the political, social or moral outlook which emphasizes individual interests, independence and freedom as opposed to statism, communitarianism or collectivism that stresses the interests and goals of the state, group or community.³ The cultural context of the modern period was a reaction to the dogmatism and dominance of religion and the Church in the medieval period. With the Copernican revolution and the new science in the modern period, the focus shifted from the church or institutions to the individual. Thus, there was an elaborate emphasis on the individual and this influenced philosophical discourses. Dostoevsky's works are precursory to this era with his leaning on the "other", responsibility and ethics. Thus, with postmodernism philosophy moved from the "individual" to the "collective", from the "I" to the "other" and from the "ego" to the "*alter ego*".

The aim of this paper is an attempt to sketch out an epistemology of otherness using the alterity of Emmanuel Levinas as a critical departure point. Epistemology investigates the scope and limits of human knowledge. It questions whether we can know everything about our world and if not, what can we know and what can we not know how much of what we claim to know can be ascertained to be true?⁴ This essay, therefore, pursues an epistemology that seeks to know from the other person's perspective rather from the knower's perspective. It is believed engaging the other in its proper context would provide more evidence for belief formation or knowledge. Levinas' original contribution is that ethics precedes metaphysics, that ethics is the true *prote philosophia*⁵ or first philosophy. The thrust of his contribution is premised or grounded on his claim that all traditional ethics and philosophy is grounded on *egoism*, which understands my relation to myself as the primary relation⁶. This again mirrors the individualism which characterized modern philosophy. Levinas argues that against this egoism, *my responsibility to the other* is the fundamental structure upon which all other structure rests. Levinas' philosophy deconstructs the previous foundation for philosophy and

reconstructs a new one. It is this ethical substructure that we shall leverage upon to advance an epistemology of otherness.

Philosophical Understanding of Otherness

The notion of the “other” is an eclectic theme that regained prominence in a great deal with 20th century French Philosophy. It means different things in different fields. In philosophy, however, it is primarily understood as the other human being in his or her differences.⁷ Sisay Mengstie explains it as “the way of defining one’s own “self” or one’s own “identity” in relation to others”⁸. By this interpretation, the other refers to the special qualities of each group that makes them different or unique in relation to another.⁹ The other does not, therefore, designate just an individual, but a broad way of understanding “difference” and “identity”. It can, therefore, stand for an individual, for a race, a social-economic class, physical ability, gender group, sexual orientation or even a nation. In the field of sociology and cultural studies, the term “other” is often used conterminously with the word, “difference”.

The concept of the other in philosophy, first featured clearly in the works of John Stuart Mill in his examination of the problem of other minds. The problem of other minds is the problem of justifying the commonsensical belief that others besides oneself possess minds. Antecedents of this position are, however, found in the works of Descartes. In Mill’s discussion, it was in reference to the consciousness of the self or mind. Edmund Husserl’s on the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditation* picks up the notion of the other which he refers to as the *alter ego*. Husserl’s discussion of the other was in reference to the phenomenology of consciousness.

However, it was with Levinas that this notion of the other was freed from these phenomenological and epistemic problems. Levinas criticized the abstraction associated with the other, especially in the work of Husserl. He criticized Husserl for reducing the other to an object of consciousness alone, which is more like an isolated ego. With Levinas, the other was then explained in terms of the ethical relation than a mere abstraction. The other of Levinas is, rather, another individual that is largely unknowable to the interpreting self but demands responsibility. In his *Totality and*

Infinity, Levinas speaks of the other as “that which calls to me, calls for a response from me, is the very source of all language and culture, and hence is a source of instruction”¹⁰. The other is another person who demands responsibility. In Husserl, the other is defined by the self and is faceless, in Levinas; the other is understood differently from the self and has a face.

Another French scholar with a similar ethical account on the other is Paul Ricoeur which he developed in his major work on intersubjectivity, *Oneself as Another*, (1992)¹¹. While Ricoeur’s thought on the other squares with Levinas on responsibility, Ricoeur’s other is reductive. He reduces the other to the self, an account that has been largely criticized. Dermot Moran explains that Levinas’s chief target in his discussion of the other is in reply to Husserl’s Fifth Cartesian Meditation. Levinas is critical of Husserl’s account of the other, because, for Levinas, Husserl reduces the Alterity of the other to the sameness of myself, that is to say, I experience the other as same as myself.¹² The difference between Husserl and Ricoeur is Ricoeur’s emphasis on a responsibility which is a furtherance of Levinas’ ethical Alterity.¹³

Conversely, Simone de Beauvoir introduces the other as “difference” in her book, *The Second Sex* (1949) in which she criticizes the dominance of patriarchy and the stereotyping of women. In this work, the woman is the other. It is from this notion, othering as a philosophical term takes on the notion of prejudice, inequality, marginality¹⁴ and an inferior contrast of one to the other. This notion of the other in De Beauvoir’s work was influenced by Hegel’s dialectic of identification and distantiation in the encounter of the self with some other in his “Master-Slave Dialectic.”^{15 16} The historical and political dimension of this master-slave dialectic concerns the relationship between the feudal lords and the serfs and from the psychological dimension, Brons Lajos explains involves self-consciousness. From the political and historical dimension, the other involves an “inferiorization” or marginalization”, while from the psychological dimension Hegel refers to the other as not-self. It is on this view Simone De Beauvoir builds on to develop the theme of the other as a marginalized or unequal second. From this philosophical construct, Lajos explains othering, thus:

A process through which identities are set up in an unequal relationship. [It] is the simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through the identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in group has and the other/ out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks. Othering thus sets up a superior self/in group in contrast to an inferior other /out-group, but this superiority/inferiority is nearly always left implicit.¹⁷

From De Beauvoir's construction of the other, othering now describes the reductive action of labelling a person as someone who belongs to a subordinate social category defined as the other. The practice of othering is the exclusion of persons who do not fit the norm of the social group, which is a version of the self.¹⁸ This is different from the notion of otherness which refers to the characteristics of the other.

There is yet another notion of the other that is fostered in the works of the Jacques Lacan, sometimes referred to as the "French Freud". Brons describes this account as a much more abstract notion, he explains:

"the Other" as something (more than someone) outside of and/or in some way opposed to the self. This is (part or aspect of) Lacan's "big Other". Building on Freud, but also influenced by Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, Lacan distinguished *little other* and *big Other*, which he represented in pseudo-mathematical notation as *a* and *A* (the first letter of "*autre*", French for "other"). Little other or *a* is a reflection and projection of the self (of the "ego" in particular); big Other or *A* is radically other and includes both other subjects and the (institutionalized) relationships between the self and those others.¹⁹

Lacan's idea brings two important points to the fore: (i) the central role of language in constituting identity and (ii) the fact that identity is fundamentally gained in the gaze of the powerful.²⁰ The different notions of the other make it a polymorphous theme in philosophy, nevertheless with slight nuances.

Otherness as an adjective of the noun 'other' refers to the characteristics of the other, the state of being different from an alien to the social identity of a person and to the identity of the self.²¹ Otherness as a philosophical discourse deals with the characteristic of "Who?" and "What?" of the other which is different from the self.

The concept of otherness in philosophy is also known as Alterity, which means the "other of two" from the Latin *alter* which means "the other (and not the one)". The term Alterity is an encounter with "the other". In philosophical phenomenology, the term Alterity can be said to gain modern conception and consummation in the works of Emmanuel Levinas. Peter Fenves explains this conception thusly: "while studying the work of Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas came to realize that the phenomenology of the other cannot be accomplished in the same manner as the phenomenology of consciousness or the hermeneutics of existence."²² Levinas refutes the grounding of philosophy on the *cogito* (consciousness or thinking), rather, he gave primacy to the other. Levinas returns to the idea of subjectivity which he presents as 'welcoming the other', as hospitality and in it, the idea of infinity is consummated. The idea of infinity in philosophy means that which is irreducible or that which constitutes the smallest unit of anything. The problem of infinity goes back to Zeno of Elea²³ and Anaxagoras.²⁴ From Descartes methodic doubt and deconstruction of all philosophies, that which is irreducible is the *cogito* or consciousness, but for Levinas, it is the other. Levinas argues that "infinity overflows the thought that thinks it".²⁵ Infinity is not to be understood *subjectively* as "an incidental notion forged by subjectivity to reflect the case of an entity encountering on the outside nothing that limits it, overflowing every limit, and thereby infinite".²⁶ Levinas attributes infinity to that which remains outside the subject, for the infinity of the other is *Alterity*.²⁷ Otherness or Alterity in Levinas is not just the *alter ego*. In Husserl's

phenomenology, the *alter ego* would just be another like I am or would be the other. For Levinas, the other is a step beyond, one moment in the future.²⁸ He also argues that the other can never be reduced to the same – not to the identity of the *cogito* (epistemology) nor to the sameness of being (ontology) – and so ethics becomes, for Levinas, ‘first philosophy’. Otherness as Alterity takes on a radical version with Levinas and other scholars have taken a moderate position in other scholars like Paul Ricoeur.

Levinas' Theory of Alterity

Levinas was born in 1906 in Lithuania which was part of pre-Revolutionary Russia. He was born into an orthodox Jewish family. The surrounding culture in Russia then tolerated Jews. In 1914, the First World War broke out and the family moved to Ukraine. There he immersed himself in Russian literature, especially the works of Nikola Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy where he experienced some ideological influence from their works. In 1923, he proceeded to Strasbourg University in France, where he gained his *licence* in philosophy. In Strasbourg, he was introduced to a number of works and scholars, particularly Husserl's phenomenology. He later bagged his doctorate from the same university and was a naturalized citizen of France in 1931.

When France declared war on Germany, he was ordered to report for military duty. During the German invasion of France in 1940, his military unit was surrounded and forced to surrender. Levinas spent the rest of World War II as a prisoner of war in a camp near Hannover in Germany. Levinas was assigned to a special barrack for Jewish prisoners, who were forbidden to practice any form of religious worship. Life in the camp was difficult, but his status as a prisoner of war protected him from victim to the Holocaust. Many members of Levinas' family were killed in the Holocaust²⁹, however, and the impact of this large-scale massacre left its mark on Levinas, both personally and philosophically. His best-known work is *Totality and Infinity an Essay on Exteriority* (1961). The effect of the wars, the killing of Jews and the living conditions of people gave rise to his philosophy of consideration for the other, which is a philosophy of

intersubjectivity; that is, how we relate to the other subject and the need to deconstruct philosophy from metaphysics is the first philosophy to ethics.

Alterity is central to Levinas' philosophy. In his, *Time and the Other*, he explains Alterity as that which:

appears as a non-reciprocal relationship – that is, as contrasting strongly with contemporaneousness. The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not... It can be said that the intersubjective space is not symmetrical. The exteriority of the other is not simply due to the space that separates what remains identical through the concept, nor is it due to any difference the concept manifest through spatial exteriority. The relationship with Alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual.³⁰

Levinas' equation of the *alter ego* with sameness can be misleading. I can never really make the other fully present in myself and that is the meaning of Alterity. Levinas is trying to safeguard the other from violation, oppression and inferiorization, hence, his use of Alterity begins with a sense of responsibility to the other. Consequently, upon the earlier established constitution of the other, Levinas holds that it is superior to the self. Levinas's refusal to equate *alter ego* with Alterity is to reject any possibility of synchronicity and reciprocity, wherein, for instance, the self does not do good to him or herself, he projects the same on the other. In his attempt to make the other absolutely distinct, Levinas comes to his specific use of Alterity. Levinas explicitly argues:

To be sure, the other that is announced does not possess this existing as the subject possesses it; its hold over my existing is mysterious. It is not unknown but unknowable, refractory to all light. But this precisely indicates that the other is in no way another myself, participating with me in common existence. The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and

harmonious relationship of communion or sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place.³¹

It suffices to mention that Levinas' critique of Husserl makes him refute the *alter ego* with the self; this marks a relationship with the future, wherein Husserl it marks a relationship with the present. Alterity marking a relationship with the future means a prescriptive obligation of the self to the other. With Levinas, otherness takes on radical Alterity which is a responsibility and an encounter with the other's "face". By "face", Levinas does not mean the literal perception of the face consisting of the eyes, forehead, ears, lips, etc., but rather in the manner the other presents him or herself as the other, that is, his/her irreducibility and transcendence.³² Levinas remarks that "the relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face cannot be reduced to that".³³ The face is not merely an appearance. It does not entail mere perception or description of what we know. But in the face-to-face encounter, I am not facing a thing merely of perceptual comprehension, but of responsibility. The other by virtue of its appearance commands a response different from knowledge. Arnel Palado argues that "although I inevitably have knowledge of the Other's manifestation and the demands put on me, the epiphany needs a response beyond my pre-theoretical perspective. Hence by the other's appearance, he also gives commands".³⁴ The command that comes from the epiphany of the other is ethical and not a compelling manipulation. In the words of Levinas:

The first word of the face is the "Thou shall not kill". It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the other is destitute; it is poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a "first-person", I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.³⁵

In Levinas, the other's command implies a challenge and a responsibility. This command does not appeal to my goodness but

to my responsibility. Further, the appeal does not change with a third other. The command is irrespective of perception. This does not also diminish the freedom of the self or ego. The challenge of moral responsibility is akin to Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative. Kant describes the moral command as categorical because, this imperative cannot be split into means and ends, it commands an action which is good in itself and which is thus necessary to a will that orients itself on reason. It is not a hypothetical imperative. William Lawhead clearly corroborates this explanation, "the moral law is presented to us as a categorical imperative. It tells you what you ought, should, or must do, but it does not depend on any prior conditions, or subjective wants and wishes, and it contains no qualifications. It takes the form, "Do X!" It is not preceded by an "if clause", for it tells you what you are morally commanded to do under all conditions and at all times".³⁶ Levinas like Kant believes that the imperative springs from reason alone and is rationally consistent. Kant expresses the first formulation of his categorical imperative thus: "There is, therefore, only one categorical imperative. It is: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law".³⁷

The second formulation of his categorical imperative is, "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only".³⁸ Kant's formulation is similar to the biblical so-called golden rule, "do unto others what you want to be done to you" (Matt 7:12). There is however a lot of pre- Greek Bible texts referring to this principle like Herodotus's. Nevertheless, Kant explicitly warns his readers to understand his second formulation as a version of the golden rule. Kant considers the golden rule as trivial because it does not refer to the foundations of obligations towards oneself and others. Later scholars, of course, fought Kant on this assumption, but Kant himself despised the golden rule. Although both Kant and Levinas can be dubbed examples of deontological ethics (from the Greek word, *deon*, meaning duty or obligation) in contrast to teleological ethics (a theory of morality that derives duty or moral obligation from what is good or desirable as an end to be achieved), there are, however, some differences in them. Whereas, Kant calls his

proposition “metaphysics of morals”, Levinas calls his, the “Ethics of ethics”. Nevertheless, Levinas does not believe, our duty to the other should be as we would treat ourselves; rather, we should treat the other in a superior manner.

In Levinas' Alterity which begins from responsibility, he argues that it does not diminish freedom, rather, it commits our responsibility to the other in a strong way. For Levinas, responsibility precedes freedom. He says, “I am responsible for him without even having taken on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is incumbent on me”.³⁹ This responsibility of care is the tie between me and the other, whether we accept or refuse to accept, whether we do know of it or not know, whether we are able to or unable to do something concrete for the other.⁴⁰ What Levinas attempts to do with this I-Other relationship of care and responsibility is to withdraw philosophy from the egoism that according to him has shrouded it. He argues that most philosophy understands the relation to oneself as the primary relation. This is clearly mirrored in the works of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke and Freud. He argues, therefore, that my *responsibility to the other* is the fundamental structure of upon which all other social structures rest.⁴¹

For Levinas, the first question of philosophy is not ontological, why is there something rather than nothing, but ethical: how can my being justify itself? He argues that ethics is foundational for all other issues since human being already lives in the midst of others. Dermont Moran interprets Levinas's philosophy as “a kind of humanism; a “humanism of the other man”, one which wants to speak of the other, not objectively in the third person, but addressing the other directly, in the vocative case, invoking his or her proper name”.⁴² The ethical outlook of Levinas' philosophy makes him describe philosophy from its Greek etymological roots, *Philos* and *Sophia*, not understood as ‘love of wisdom’, but he understood as the ‘wisdom of love’. With this interpretation, Levinas disrupts and repositions the foundations of philosophy from the domain of ontology to that of ethics. The discourse on Levinas' Alterity opens up a number of considerations for ethics, epistemology and even ontology. One point is clear; Levinas withdraws philosophy from

individualism to otherness and from objectification of knowledge to subjectivity of knowledge claims.

Alterity and Epistemology: Towards an Epistemology of Otherness

Levinas' thoughts on Alterity leave a lot of epistemological questions open. Epistemology which concerns itself with how we know what we know and what we can know is an open-ended discipline. The fact that human knowledge is really finite makes epistemology dynamic. Philosophy deals with knowledge not only as a first-order activity of producing knowledge but, also as a second order enterprise of criticizing and justifying the grounds of knowledge produced in other disciplines.⁴³ The activity of justifying the grounds of knowledge is the focus of epistemology. The epistemological questions provoked by Levinas's Alterity begins with a question like: how can we really know the other person? In the Kantian-Hegelian tradition, truth is made relative to the subject. Can we really know the other without a relationship? relationship? Does the pre-reflective self-consciousness mind really know? Are there not forms of othering, in which we base knowledge of the other on the perceptual conditions and terms, and do not seek the other's position or perspective? Are there not claims of epistemic injustice to the other, when the claims and beliefs are based only on the subject alone without comprehending all the circumstances of the other? These are the questions an epistemology of otherness asks.

An epistemology of otherness is socially-oriented. By the token, it falls into the domain of epistemology known as social epistemology. Social epistemology departs from traditional epistemology by critiquing its foundational assumption that only individuals can know. Social epistemology, on the contrary, argues that there are social sources of knowledge and consideration outside an individual domain to the other enters into a social domain. When we talk about the testimony of the other as a source of knowledge rather than my individual perception alone, then we are talking of social epistemology. The other becomes an epistemic agent, who knows and can be relied upon in forming beliefs. Social epistemology which is a program epistemologists have engaged in,

in the last thirty years more vigorously seeks to address the epistemic imbalances from individual epistemology by dealing with social conditions, relations within a social system. This is, precisely, what Alterity pursues, seeking the perspective of the other. In an epistemology of otherness, the other becomes a source of knowledge. Thus, knowledge is no longer determined from the perceiver's perspective alone, but also from the "object", which Levinas calls the other. Since Levinas gives primacy to the other before the self, an epistemology of otherness becomes a variant of social epistemology, and it investigates truth from the social conditions and relations of the other.

An epistemology of otherness is normative in its approach. Steve Fuller, who is a prominent figure of a variant of social epistemology argues that his vision of social epistemology is committed to normativity. The normative approach is committed to organizing the means available to bring about or maintain a desirable state of affairs.⁴⁴ This approach keeps opening the scope of the norms. Traditional epistemology arguably seeks the objectification of knowledge. It means there are objective and linear paradigms for judging truth and knowledge. However, Edmund Gettier with his epochal paper, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"⁴⁵ Published in 1963, contested the dogmatism of objective paradigms. Since then, there have been new philosophies that favoured new ways and methods of searching for truth and knowledge. These are reflected in the philosophies of Richard Rorty with his epistemological behaviourism, Thomas Kuhn's thought on scientific revolution and even Paul Feyerabend's methodical pluralism. It is this similar idea of normativity that is mirrored in Levinas's Alterity.

From Levinas's critique of traditional philosophy, he saw western metaphysics as a grand project of totalization, of reducing everything to the sphere of the ego, the self and thereby eliding the difference between *being* and *thought*. It means whatever is thought of or represented in thought we take alone to be true. The weakness of this approach is that it limits being to self-conception or self-knowledge. For Levinas, philosophy must always be an attempt to defend the priority of the other and resist its reduction to the sphere

of sameness. The philosophy of the same is what has grounded all knowledge to involve objectification with a violation of the object. This can create an epistemic injustice and imbalance with regards to knowledge production. In contrast, an epistemology of otherness argues for an intersubjective epistemology. This is in contrast with epistemic relativism. Epistemological relativism may be defined as the view that knowledge (and/or truth) is relative – to time, to place, to society, to culture, to historical epoch, to conceptual scheme or framework, or to personal training or conviction – so that what counts as valid knowledge depends upon these variables.⁴⁶

An intersubjective epistemology in this sense would imply one that takes what a subject or a group of subjects holds to be true as being true on the basis of valid reasons for such beliefs. In this case, knowledge is not just a function of the subject's epistemic virtue(s), but also those of the object. Justification of beliefs in intersubjective epistemology involves factors beyond the internal faculty of the subject (internalism) but also external (externalism) to it. Justification theory for intersubjective epistemology is primarily context-dependent. Thus, intersubjectivism can come in either an individualistic form or a social form. In the former, this theory relies on the object which is the other, while in the latter, the other takes on a collective nature beyond an atomic individual. This can help to understand that what happens in the social sphere is not just independent of the subject. For instance, when you are talking to me and I appear to be expressionless, you may conclude that I am bored by what you are saying. It may be that as you spoke, my mind went to a bad experience which changed my feeling. An intersubjectivist epistemology would investigate into what made my feelings change, rather than relying on the justification that was taken from my expression. Levinas' Alterity is premised on a defense of intersubjectivity. In Levinas, the other is everything which resists such totalizations and which resists violence. The other means that which cannot be objectified. Intersubjectivity is contrary to totality. This is explained by Levinas in his major work, *Totality and Infinity* as a defense of intersubjectivity.

An epistemology of otherness seeks to address the problem of epistemic injustice from perceptual understanding and othering.

Epistemic injustice refers to “those forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding and participation in communicative practice”⁴⁷. This term was coined by Miranda Fricker in 2007. The term, othering, on the other hand is the process of treating someone as different, inferior, prejudiced or looked-down than oneself. It is a form of inferiorization and prejudicing. Allie Bunch⁴⁸ categorizes three different forms of epistemic injustice in the process of othering as (1) Discriminatory epistemic injustice which involves the dehumanization of the other or out-group, (2) Testimonial epistemic injustice which comes as reduced credibility and silencing. Silencing comes from non-reciprocity (3) Distributive Epistemic injustice which refers to the refusal of resources for the other or group. An epistemology of otherness offers non-oppressive ways of knowing. An epistemology of otherness involves epistemic responsibility. Epistemic responsibility involves taking responsibility for our individual beliefs. Responsibility is at the heart of Levinas’s Alterity. An epistemology of otherness would not be totalizing but prioritizing the other in forming a judgment about him/her.

Conclusion

The ethical Alterity of Emmanuel Levinas has been examined in this paper as a template for developing an epistemology of otherness. Differences in social relations have brought to light imbalances and sometimes even forms of injustice. The search for knowledge is a Herculean task and scepticism of different kinds has challenged what we can know from different sides. Thus, the task of epistemology is to secure what we know from errors and make our knowledge claims warranted. In the light of a self-absorbed and the individualistic nature traditional objectivist epistemology has been shrouded in, the human epistemic situation can be said to be incomplete. The desire to have a wholesome epistemic situation opened the threshold for social epistemology. The focus of social epistemology is assessing new pathways we can know. One of such, is how we can know from not just from the knower’s perspective but also from the objects. This is an intersubjective epistemology which this work has described as an epistemology of otherness. This

paper has argued that it is in knowing the other better, that we can well relate with him/her and not see him/her as an object to be violated. The epistemology of otherness prescribed in this paper seeks to eliminate the possibility of epistemic injustice and false claims. The aim is to achieve truth of the other, his/her appreciation. Without claiming to be a perfect agenda, the epistemology of otherness is a step towards knowing the other better.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dostoevsky Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Transl. from the Russian by Constance Garnett, New York: The Lowell Press, 2009. p 202.

² Docherty Thomas, "Postmodernism" in Honderich Ted (ed), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, second edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005

³ Fidelis Chuka Aghamelu & Emeka Cyril Ejike, "Hegel's Contributions To Modern Individualism And Totalitarianism" in <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/og.v13i1.12>

⁴ Jimoh Anselm, *Certitude and Doubt A Study Guide in Epistemology*, Second Edition, Benin: Floreat Publication, 2017, p. 8.

⁵ The term, "*prote philoophia*", was coined by Aristotle for *Metaphysics*. It is the most general abstract science and thus conceived as the foundation of philosophy itself. See, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV, 1, 1003 a21. Levinas on the other hand, declared that rather than metaphysics, ethics is the first philosophy.

⁶ Dermon Doran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2000. Pp 320-321.

⁷ Derrida Jacques, "Other" in Honderich Ted (ed), *Ibid*.

⁸ Mengstie Sisay, "Constructions of "Otherness" and the Role of Education: The Case of Ethiopia" in *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, No. 2, 2011, p. 7

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Levinas Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity An Essay on Exteriority*, Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1979. P. 46

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹² Moran Dermot, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2000. pp. 337-338

¹³ See Dierckxsens Geoffrey's "Otherness and Desire in Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of the Self" in <https://repository.uantwerpen.be/docman-irua/d34db6/d606e14f.pdf>

¹⁴ Jimoh Anselm "Justice and the Othered minority Lessons from African Communalism" in Elvis Imafidon (ed), *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference*: Switzerland: Springer, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04941-6_12-1

¹⁵ Brons Lajos, "Othering an Analysis" in *Transcience*, 6 (1), 2015, p. 69

¹⁶ See also, G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller with analysis of the text and foreword by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

¹⁷ Lajos, p. 70.

¹⁸ "Othering", *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Third Edition (1999), p. 620.

¹⁹ Brons, p. 74.

²⁰ Jimoh, "Justice and the Othered minority: Lessons from African Communalism", *ibid.*

²¹ Miller, J. "Otherness". *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. 2008, pp. 588–591.

²² Fenves Peter, "Alterity and identity, Post modern theories of" in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, version 1.0, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

²³ Zeno opens up the problem of infinity with his paradoxes on infinity. He argues against the Pythagorean theory of the plurality of things. According to the Pythagoreans, everything in the universe is made up of units. Now, these units, says, Zeno, are either with size or without size. If they are, they can always be divided up which means they are infinitely divisible. And since they are infinitely divisible they must be made up of infinite units. In other words, everything in the universe is made up of an infinite number of units. But whatever is made up of infinite number of units must be infinitely great. It follows therefore that everything in the universe is infinitely great. Now, let us take the second alternative and say that these units are without size. In that case, says, Zeno, they must be infinitely small. And if everything in the universe is made up of infinitely small units, it follows that everything in the universe is infinitely small. See, Omoregbe Joseph, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*, vol. one Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1999. P. 16.

²⁴ Anaxagoras' philosophy begins by wading into the ultimate stuff of reality by attempting to reconcile the theories of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Empedocles had proposed four elements as the constitutive of all reality. Anaxagoras leveraging on Empedocles' thought, argues that each of these four elements are themselves a combination of several different particles. In other words, there are particles of all things in everything. This is how Anaxagoras describes his notion of the infinite. See, Omoregbe, Joseph, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*, *Ibid.* p. 20.

²⁵ Levinas Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 26.

²⁷ Friedman Randy, "Alterity and Asymmetry in Levinas's Ethical Phenomenology", *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, vol. 13, Number 1, 2014, p. 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁹ Holocaust refers to the genocide during World War II in which Nazi Germany, aided by its collaborators, murdered over six million Jews. This is an estimate of over two-third of the Jewish population of Europe between 1941 and 1945.

³⁰ Levinas Emmanuel, *Time and the Other*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987. P.84.

³¹ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 74.

³² Arnel Palado, "Emmanuel Levinas on the Other and the Third Party" in <https://ustedu.academia.edu/ArnelPalado>.

³³ Levinas Emmanuel, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversation with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985, Pp 85-86.

³⁴ Arnel Palado, "Emmanuel Levinas on the Other and the Third Party", *Ibid*.

³⁵ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversation with Philippe Nemo*, p. 89.

³⁶ Lawhead William, *The Voyage of Discovery, A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, second edition, London: Wadsworth Group, 2002. P. 342.

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Lewis White Beck, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, Library of Liberal Arts, 1959, 39.

³⁸ Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 47.

³⁹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversation with Philippe Nemo*, p. 96.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 97.

⁴¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 79; 51

⁴² Dermont, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, p. 321.

⁴³ Owolabi Kolawole, "The Nature and Problems of Knowledge" in Owolabi Kolawole (ed) *Issues and Problems in Philosophy*, Ibadan: Grovacs Network, 2000. P. 49.

⁴⁴ Fuller Steve, "A sense of Epistemic Agency Fit for Social Epistemology" in Reider Patrick, *Social Epistemology and Epistemic Agency Decentralizing Epistemic Agency*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. P. 21.

⁴⁵ Gettier Edmund, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" in *Analysis*, vol. 23, no. 6. June 1963. Pp. 121-123.

⁴⁶ Harvey Siegel, "Relativism" in Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (eds), *A Companion to Epistemology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. Pp 428-429.

⁴⁷ Kidd, Ian James; Medina, José; Pohlhaus Jr., Gaile (2017). "Introduction to the Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice". In Kidd, Ian James; Medina, José; Pohlhaus Jr., Gaile (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. Routledge. p. 1. doi:10.4324/9781315212043

⁴⁸ Bunch Allie, "Epistemic Violence in the Process of Othering: Real World Applications and Moving Forward", in *Scholarly Undergraduate Research Journal at Clark*: Vol. 1, Article retrieved from <https://commons.clarku.edu/surj/vol1/iss1/2/>