

The Other with the Absolute Alterity

-- An analysis of the salvation of the Other by Levinas and Derrida

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Abstract: The tragic movements of the 20th century prompt thinkers to reflect on Western philosophy. Western philosophy, which is supposed to be the foundation of civilization, has led to violence against the other because of its tendency to seek totality and identity. The Jewish thinkers Levinas and Derrida call for attention to the other, they recognize that there is an insurmountable boundary between the Other as the other and the self as the subject, so "I" can no longer grasp the Other cognitively, and "I" and the Other are absolutely exterior and can no longer be integrated together. This absolute alterity of the Other gives ethics and justice a broad space. Levinas constructs a radical ethics towards the Other, and Derrida rethinks justice based on the different individuals who have lost "us". Their reflections remain invaluable for us to rethink Western philosophy, ethics and justice.

Keywords: Alterity, Ethics, Justice, The other, The Other.

1. Introduction

The twentieth century is marked by horrific atrocities, and people have been destroyed in various movements that represent "truth", as if it is not living people with feelings who fall, but something called a "concept", something that does not correspond to the so-called "truth". Those people, groups or parties who claim to have mastered the truth think that they have absolute good in some way, and will destroy at any cost "things" that do not correspond to the idea in order to achieve their "great" goals. In the view of Levinas and Derrida, who were deeply influenced by those atrocities, western philosophy characterized by the pursuit of totality and identity does not give the other a real place, on the contrary, the other is always in a state of repression in this mode of thinking, which highlights the violent side of Western philosophy or metaphysics.

2. The Other and The Philosophy as The Same

How can this metaphysical violence be understood? Ontological philosophy always seeks the origin of the world, and believes that all things can be understood and explained under the origin. Plato's theory of ideas is the representative of this philosophy, and this doctrine of seeking the origin will inevitably lead to identity and totality in the end. Levinas thinks that this primacy of identity is the teaching of Socrates, who compares himself to a "midwife". By means of dialogue with others, Socrates allows others to discover knowledge that he originally has, but has only forgotten later, that is, we do not acquire any knowledge from the outside, we always have those knowledge which come to me from the outside, so we always maintain our own identity, we are free.

Descartes' philosophy reflects the identity of this philosophy. "I think, therefore I am", philosophy from the very beginning appeals to "I" as the subject of knowledge, and the way philosophy treats the world is also defined, that is, the world is an object of knowledge. Although Descartes realizes that the Other cannot be treated as an object, he can not get

rid of the tendency of solipsism because he takes "cogito" as the core and starting point of his philosophy, that is, he still views the Other from the perspective of self, the Other is regarded as a subject of knowledge with "I", and the Other was reduced to "I". Moreover, this kind of thinking mode of "subject-object duality" is only limited to understanding the world from the level of cognition, that is to say, it is still to understand things in concept or generality.

Husserl's phenomenology still fails to give real status to the Other. His theory of "intersubjectivity" aims to solve the problem of how a priori "we" is possible, that is, how the epistemological subject "I" is consistent with the Other who is also a subject. Phenomenology says that the world is given to both me and others, and at the same time "I" can turn to others and experience them as similar to myself, and others can respond to our recognition and see us as similar to them, so that communication between "I" and "others" can take place. However, the understanding of the subject of the Other is always given from the perspective of the external "me", and it cannot be transformed into the original experience of the Others. Husserl actually regards the Other as another me, and also eliminates the alterity of the Other, and this Other returning to the self is ultimately reduced to the same.

But the Other is not willing to be homogenized, and the "dissonant" voice still exists, such as Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's thought has a more prominent feature, that is, it pays attention to "individual life". If the critical philosophy represented by Hegel represents the strongest voice of that era, then Kierkegaard undoubtedly provides us with another way of looking at individual survival. For him, philosophical thinking should always revolve around the life of the individual, and all his own philosophy is aimed at solving the problems arising from his personal life. Kierkegaard understands the traditional philosophy's attempt to understand the world through concepts, but he believes that the objective truth sought by the traditional philosophy should be limited to the "system", that is, it is only a knowledge system, only represents the "intellectual life", and it is not practical help to solve the puzzles of life (such as Kierkegaard's own marriage and faith problems). It can be said that this truth to some

extent deviates from the original meaning of individual survival. Following the path started by Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida reconsider their concerns about the self and the Other.

3. The Other Is Saved in Ethics

Levinas argues that the history of philosophy "can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality"[1], and Heidegger's philosophy is representative of the philosophy. For Heidegger, from the beginning of philosophy, and by virtue of this beginning, Being of the existents reveals itself as arche (principle), and it is precisely because of Being that we can think of the existents as 'one', as a 'whole' or totality. [2] This philosophy harms precisely one of the most valuable experiences—the proximity between human beings, which in Levinas manifests itself in ethics or goodness, which cannot be found on the basis of ontology. First, for Heidegger, Being manifests as a temporal unfolding of existence, which is clearly neutral and exists only for its own sake; Secondly, any existents, especially Dasein, has to be explained from the point of Being, so that a man is understood as a being for the sake of his own existence, which is essentially independent of the proximity to the Other. [3] At the same time, the relation to the Other is subordinate to the relation to Being, and "to affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom." [4]

Levinas's opinion is to understand the good, that is, the proximity between people, as a kind of hope for man's salvation from Being. In his early writings, he attempts to construct a notion of "Being" in the pure sense of the word, which is the fact of our existence, the fact of "there is", an anonymous and terrifying force of existence that is incapable of escaping, aimless, meaningless. After understanding Being as an "evil", Levinas managed to find a way for man to escape from Being. One way of escaping is to connect with the world in enjoyment and cognition, however, it is still a way of internalizing things that eventually become our homogeneity, and therefore we can't really get out of our own existence. However, the presence of the Other makes it possible. The Other is such a thing, and when we relate to it, we do not rely on a pattern of cognition, but on a way in which we can truly retain the Other alterity. Thus, sociality, embodied in relations with the Other, "will be a way of escaping being otherwise than through knowledge." [5]

In fact, the pattern of my relation to the Other is a common connection in Levinas' thought, that is, in a dualistic structure, one is in an unequal relationship with the other, one nourishes the other, but the two are never incorporated into a relationship linked by synthesis. The Other cannot be included in a cognitively constructed synthesis, not because knowledge is incapable of knowing him, but because my consciousness, my power itself, is being questioned by the Other. Therefore, it is only in the relationship with the Other that one can step out of own existence. And in the second most important work, "Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence", Levinas is still thinking about the possibility of coming out of being, but with a different strategy and more radical thinking. "The task is to conceive of the possibility of a break out of essence." [6] (The essence means "being" or "to be" in

Levinas) The reason for breaking out of "to be" is that "to be" means that a thing is concerned only with itself in the process of ceaselessly becoming its own being. In contrast, otherwise than being or beyond essence means a selfless, a duty that has nothing to do with interests. This responsibility is not my responsibility for my own existence, but the responsibility for those peoples who have nothing to do with me, and this responsibility falls upon me alone, and I can not evade it. Therefore, I no longer remain in myself, no longer live for my own existence, but become the hostage of the Other, constantly responding to others, even living for the Other. In this hostage structure, I am in a position that I cannot choose, that is, I am chosen by the Other, and this selection and substitution is older than Being and comes from the untraceable past. The hostage structure precedes Heidegger's "Being and existents" structure, which is something more original. In the end, I came out of own existence in the proximity to the Other, and the Other was protected in this radical ethical relationship.

4. Derrida's Justice of the Other

In Levinas's view, there is a mystical and impassable boundary between me and the Other, who is always external to me, and who can only be understood and approached in a way similar to Kierkegaard's quest for God—to feel and experience another life with my full heart, to approach it infinitely. This absolute alterity of the Other gives ethics a broad space, and justice can also be generated. And this alterity is also appreciated by Derrida, which is evident in his thoughts of justice. A phrase often quoted by Derrida in "The Politics of Friendship" is: "Ah, friends: there are no friends", he thinks that there are no friends at all, each of us is one by one, there can be no harmony among us on the basis of unity, there is no so-called "we agree", "I and you" are not the result of "we", philosophy cannot cross in this way, because we are not different from each other at all. The traditional way only turns each living individual into a concept of unity or antagonism, such as friend and enemy, and these complex and delicate relationships between individuals become simple and crude, and the differences between individuals also disappear in it.

When the world loses "us," individuals will confront the world with their own uniqueness, and Derrida's democracy and justice are built on this foundation. The traditional democracy is to establish a common and equal relationship, which is reflected in the fact that everyone who has political rights has the same right to vote, democracy is calculable in this case, then the democracy is equivalent to making decisions according to such calculations. So the democracy declares the will of the majority, is the rule of the majority over the minority—the minority is subordinate to the majority. The rule that the majority is right becomes just, and this "majority" has to some extent become a concept, a dogma, something to which we must submit. This logic is most evident in the political life of the 20th century. The camp of the majority? The camp of the few? Who are our friends? Who are our enemies? Politics must distinguish between these, as Derrida put it in "The Politics of Friendship": "if Schmitt is to be believed, politics could never be thought without knowing what 'enemy' means, nor a decision made without knowing who the enemy is. That is to say: without the identification by which the enemy is identified, himself, and by which one is identified, oneself." [7]

Having a firm and correct political direction becomes a

matter of life and death, and those whose political ideas are different from "me" become the targets of my elimination. And this kind of criminal activity will always be overshadowed by our optimism, because we always think that we are in a certain camp of justice, that we represent the direction of social development, and that what we do is contributing to the progress of history and the progress of mankind. This "justice" shows that this tyranny is extremely justified, and that acting in the name of "justice" is even more horrific and cruel. We have sacrificed the natural feelings of man for the inhumane political concept, for some so-called ideal. If we go back, isn't the French Revolution in the 18th century a representative of this situation, as Derrida argues, Rousseau's philosophy is dangerous in the hands of the Jacobins.[8] Is there no other way of understanding politics, justice and democracy? If there were no "we", no division between "friends" and "enemies", would the democracy still exist? "Is there another thought of calculation and of number, another way of apprehending the universality of the singular which, without dooming politics to the incalculable, would still justify the old name of democracy?" [9]

Derrida understands justice from the perspective of the other. Justice is about the "whole other," which means that each of us can be treated justly in the name of justice, without exception. Laws or rules only cover a part of the society, and the rights of those special others excluded by the system and law cannot be guaranteed. This characteristic of law can be easily proved. For example, Derrida analyzes the Declaration of Independence of the United States, which regards the "free and good people" as a community representing the United States, however, Indians, blacks, etc., are not recognized, and similar examples abound, so it is no wonder that Derrida would say that this era is not a thing of the past. Therefore, there is always space for deconstruction of law, and the deconstruction of law is also an affirmation of justice to a certain extent. Derrida says that justice is possible as an impossible experience, which means that although justice cannot be fully realized, we can experience it, and this experience is first shown as the paradoxical and difficult experience we have to face in the process of pursuing justice. This paradox lies in the fact that we must not only satisfy universal laws or rules in our judgments, but also conform to justice, that is, respect for the particularity of each event or individual. The justice is infinite, it cannot be reduced to laws, rules, institutions, an act, a theory, a person, etc. "Infinite because it is irreducible, irreducible because owed to the other, owed to the other, before any contract, because it has come, the other's coming as the singularity that is always other." [10] Although justice cannot be reduced to laws and rules, the coming of justice in the world must depend on the implementation of laws and rules, but such rules cannot encompass all possibilities, and others could never be covered by such rules, so there is always a need to care for them, and justice lies in this.

5. Conclusion

Levinas and Derrida are both Jews living in France, and they are deeply affected by the tragic movements of the 20th century, which may have prompted them to focus on the other and rethink Western philosophy. They recognize that Western philosophy's habitual way of thinking about everything in terms of a system or a principle implies a kind of violence that

harms the other. Levinas realizes that the relationship between "I" as a subject and the Other is not a cognitive relationship, not a process of "I" knowing the Other and incorporating him into my knowledge system. Because the Other is completely different from "I", he can express himself, not through "I", and he can resist "I" to grasping him with silent eyes. The relationship between "I" and the Other should be a proximity, guard, and response. Levinas understands the proximity between human beings as the key for human beings to get out of their own existence. People no longer live for themselves, but for others. In this kind of goodness people could get out of the meaninglessness of existence and get saved. Derrida, on the other hand, recognizes the absolute difference between people. He believes that traditional democratic and political views are based on the similarity between people, and democracy and politics have evolved into a distinction between minorities and majorities, friends and enemies, which has led to many atrocities. How does justice think when there is no "we"? Derrida believes that justice is about the complete other, is infinite, and every individual should be protected. However, our laws and rules cannot meet all possibilities, so we must constantly deconstruct our laws and rules to adapt to the requirements of justice in the process of pursuing justice. Derrida, on the other hand, recognizes the absolute difference between people, and he believes that the traditional view of democracy and politics are based on the similarity between people, and that democracy and politics evolve to a kind of distinction between the minority and the majority, between friends and enemies, which leads to many atrocities. How can justice be thought about when there is no "we"? Derrida believes that justice is about the complete other, infinite and every individual should be protected, however, our laws and rules can not always meet all possibilities, so we must constantly deconstruct our laws and rules in the process of pursuing justice to adapt them to the requirements of justice.

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