

The Crisis of Ethics: A Levinasian Response

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Abstract: In historical and contemporary philosophical discourse, the concept of ethics has endured profound challenges that necessitate critical reflection and novel approaches. This article delves into the history of ethics from which is also revealed an ever present crisis of ethics: from the ancient sceptics; contrasting enlightenment moral normative frameworks; analytical challenges to the place of ethics within philosophical discussion. By tracing the trajectory of ethical thought and its inherent problems, we recognise the need for a ground-breaking response. I propose that Emmanuel Levinas' ethics can offer such a response to philosophical ethical tradition and its accompanying crisis in its revolutionary and novel approach. Rejecting the egocentric and rational foundation of traditional philosophy and ethics, Levinas recognises a primacy and priority of "the Other" as an inexhaustible source of ethical significance. As this meeting with Other occurs before any totality or rationality is possible, there is also revealed to be a primacy of ethics over other traditionally privileged philosophical categories. By engaging with Levinas' philosophy, this article endeavors to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the crisis of ethics in a rapidly changing world. It argues for the pressing need to reevaluate ethical frameworks in light of the Levinasian response, emphasizing the moral imperative to prioritise ethical responsibility and the ethical significance of the Other. This essay invites readers to reevaluate their understanding of ethics and engage in a renewed commitment to the ethical imperative presented by Levinas' philosophy.

Keywords: crisis; ethics; Levinas; responsibility

Introduction

It is certainly no exaggeration to conclude that ethics today is considered to be in a state of crisis. Although it is a branch of philosophy that can be traced back to its very beginnings and has always been prominent, some have argued that it has resulted in nothing but dissatisfac-

tion and failure. Throughout its history it has taken on many forms. There have been many different normative frameworks, many different applications, and “metaethics” has tried to truly define its subject matter, but today we see little progression in ethical discussions since Plato. A host of writers have picked up on this sense of crisis from the Sceptics in antiquity, to Friedrich Nietzsche and contemporary thinkers such as Alisdair MacIntyre. After all, in a world that has seen endless war, violence and crisis, how can we say that morality exists? Did it not die at Auschwitz? If God really is dead then can there still be a place for morality? The ancient striving for a good life seems as distant as reaching Eden or a progressive free society founded on rational principles. This paper will begin by tracing the history of ethics and the recurring crisis that will be revealed to be omnipresent. After this, I will present Emmanuel Levinas’ original and revolutionary theory of ethics which can serve as a response to this apparent crisis and show how such a crisis of ethics is actually an impossibility.

The Crisis of Ethics

Philosophical inquiry into ethics and morality has been of interest to philosophers since ancient Greece, but from these very beginnings the idea of a crisis within ethics is evident in the form of moral sceptics, most famously Pyrrho, who questioned whether it was possible to have knowledge of, or achieve, the Good and virtue. For example, Aristotle’s “virtue ethics” lists many virtues, such as temperance, courage and wisdom, as characteristics that a moral agent would have. Acquiring such virtues leads one to live a moral life with the aim of reaching “eudaimonia,” which is a full and flourishing life. In response to this, the Sceptics would ask why certain characteristics are chosen over others? If courage leads to getting oneself killed and denying the opportunity for a full and flourishing life, would meekness not have been a better choice? Whereas Aristotle argues that “eudaimonia” is objective, he fails to offer a satisfactory definition or explain how it is realisable; the Sceptics would state, in opposition, that it is undefinable and relative. For every argument that can be used to support one moral position, another contrasting opinion can also be made and the sceptics

therefore adhere to a “suspension of judgement.”³⁸

Such a sceptical outlook sought many to find the justification and source of ethics in a transcendental source that lay beyond our understanding or rational capabilities, with the root of such thought being evident in Plato and his “Good beyond being.” This trend would continue during the dominance of Catholicism and religion that spread throughout the European middle ages, where ethics seemed to become subsumed and integrated into religion, evident in thinkers such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Ethics and moral action now belonged to faith and a life in accordance with the eternal and objective scriptures rather than rational reasoning or debate. For instance, I must not kill others because God's commandments tell me that it is immoral to do so. However, such thought itself descended into crisis with the rise of the scientific method during the enlightenment period, which brought with it a questioning of the previous foundation of our moral codes and conduct. Arguably, such practices seemed no better with the endless religious wars that plagued this time.

Immanuel Kant, who is often heralded as the father of the enlightenment period in Europe and the philosophy of this time that followed the religious age, developed a new ethical framework to suit the nascent systems of thought that began to appear. His normative ethical theory, what is known as “deontology,” argued that there were moral codes that could be uncovered by an autonomous individual’s utilisation of reason which could then be applied universally. Kant argues that ethical action be centered around what he called the “categorical imperative” which consists of two maxims: 1) “*I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law;*”³⁹ 2) “*to treat himself and all others never merely as means but always at the same time as ends in themselves.*”⁴⁰ In a similarity to religious commandments, I must not kill because such an action does not pass either of the two maxims. However, where this theory differs is that this commandment and duty does not come from a transcendental source, but

³⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonsim* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2000) 79.

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 41.

from my own rational capabilities. But again, it did not take long for a similar crisis to appear with this new form of ethics, such as Nietzsche's questioning of the foundations of both religion and these new now-dominant enlightenment values. Other ethical theories were sought, such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill's "utilitarianism." This is the view that ethics was determined by utility and that ethical actions were those that created the most happiness. Yet for every ethical framework that was developed, further problems and crises arose in both theory and practice. For example, the utilitarian framework had no response to the rise of national socialism in Germany where the happiness of the majority, i.e. German nationals, was increased by the cleansing of minorities. When presented with such varied ethical frameworks, the problem of epiquollence presented by the sceptics returns: why should I choose one over the other when both have advantages and problems?

Such problems with traditional ethics culminated in many thinkers becoming disillusioned with ethics, which was simply part of the wider concern with the whole of philosophy in general because of this perceived lack of progress since ancient Greece. Ethics was no exception to the crisis that European thought found itself engulfed in at the beginning of the 20th century and a result of this was the "analytical turn" that philosophy underwent. There was a philosophical shift that now concentrated upon language, meaning and logic, which brought with it a questioning of ethics and other long held philosophical traditions. It was hoped that by turning our focus onto language and logic, such progress would be made. This resulted in a fundamental change in the study of ethics and the rise of what has become known as "metaethics." With this, instead of what actions or framework were considered to be good, other questions were asked: can the good ever be known? Is the good objective or relative? What are the limitations of ethical questioning? This turn towards language and logic can be seen in Moore or Mill's discussion on the meaning of the word "good" which came to dominate philosophical circles concerning ethics. At the forefront of academic philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century were the logical positivists, who sought to determine what we can and cannot speak about in philosophy; what was meaningful discussion and what was meaningless conjecture? They argued that for something to be worthwhile discussing it must either be a tautology or empirically verifiable. As ethical statements are neither, it resulted in any discussion on ethics being consid-

ered logically meaningless, not worthy of philosophical discussions, or simply emotive statements that meant no more than “boo!” or “hurrah!” This culminated in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s declaration that “whereof one cannot speak one must be silent,”⁴¹ and ethics fell into such a category. But again, and we are beginning to notice a pattern here, such a theory of ethics soon descended into a crisis and its method and aims were questioned once more.

Soon after the rise of such metaethical theories, many crises of the 20th century occurred: World Wars, massacres and violence of an unprecedented level, the green movement, identity and gender politics, to name but a few. How could ethics and philosophers continue to stay silent on such issues? While they were arguing over definitions and meaning, society, people’s actions and what it meant to lead a good life was changing in the concrete lived world outside of classrooms and conference halls. Technological, medical and scientific advancements brought new questions and concerns into the ethical realm. Due to this, we again begin to see the questioning of the metaethical methods, tasks and aims, and ethics began to take on a new form: what has come to be known as “applied ethics.” The analytical method and task was consigned as too abstract and rejected as not offering enough guidance and practical application to real life situations and dilemmas. The many crises of the Western world brought discussion about ethics back into the mainstream and public debate. However, such crises and the lack of response from either contemporary or historical moral frameworks also fuelled anti-humanistic rhetoric to the problems posed, resulting in ethics descending either into relativism or scepticism. Responses to this took up traditional arguments such as trying to find a foundation for ethics in reason or biology, but this simply led to the reappearance and dissatisfaction of these old and traditional views. On a theoretical level, questions continued to be raised about our traditional values and meaning, resulting in the overall sense of existential dread throughout Europe. Edmund Husserl summarised the feeling of the time when he declared a “crisis of European humanity itself in respect to the total meaningfulness of its

⁴¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Press, 1922), 90.

cultural life, its total ‘*Existenz*’.”⁴² Husserl states that a crisis occurs when “the whole manner in which it has set its task and developed a methodology for it, has become questionable.”⁴³ Looking back upon this short history of ethics it is undoubtable that we can conclude that it has recurringly found itself in a state of crisis.

Today, ethics continues on as it always has. Debates continue surrounding the correct normative framework, questions of what “good” means, and the application of ethics to contemporary matters such as technology and the environment replace those on abortion and sexuality. The disillusionment with ethics is also still very evident in thinkers such as in Alasdair MacIntyre, Sabina Lovibond and many others. Maria Dimitrova notes that in our current epoch “moral codes are now finished. The chant of a universal moral law as well the particular has long been sung.”⁴⁴ The result is that “morality appears in a rather misty atmosphere in which its contours and meaning are difficult or almost impossible to outline or grasp.”⁴⁵

Levinas’ Original Ethics

Emmanuel Levinas also picks up on the failures of ethics, asking in his work *Totality and Infinity*: “whether we are not duped by morality.”⁴⁶ His response was to formulate an original and revolutionary notion of ethics that recognised its primary and foundational nature. It’s originality is noted by many thinkers: Sean Hand describes it as a “post-rational ethics;”⁴⁷ Micheal Morgan calls it an “ethics without (an) ethical system;”⁴⁸ and Zygmunt Bauman a “postmodern ethics.”⁴⁹ One originality

⁴² Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1970), 12.

⁴³ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁴ Maria Dimitrova, *Sociality & Justice* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2016), 209-210.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 211.

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Ltd, 1989), v.

⁴⁸ Micheal Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24.

⁴⁹ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).

when compared with traditional ethical systems is that Levinas does not seek any normative rules like those found in Kant's deontological ethics. We can see here how it is "post-rational," for, unlike these traditional theories, he does not seek any foundation via rational support but instead his support is found in the immediate everyday relation of what he calls the "face-to-face meeting." This meeting is *the* primordial and primary relation that we find ourselves involved in. It is pre-rational, pre-theoretical and, although seemingly bizarrely simple, deeply profound. Levinas states that before knowledge, subjectivity, language and any ontological or epistemological claims can be made, there is the appearance of another person upon our horizon who is the motivation for all of these. For, in an isolated world, what need is there for these? The Other (*Autrui*) confronts and demands a response from us, creating a separation between I and You, and this is the primordial communication. This meeting is inherently ethical because their face commands an ethical order of "you shall not kill!" While many traditional theories argue that violence is primary, such as standard Darwinian interpretations which both the social and natural sciences tradition adopted, Levinas argues this ethical command comes first and violence is only possible if we reject this. The face is one of "poverty," "weakness," and "destituteness." It is "the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan,"⁵⁰ demanding that we do not kill and this burdens us with freedom to enact upon it and responsibility to them, which in turn also grants us with our subjectivity, freedom and meaning.

Here we can see another difference from the traditional ethical theories. While deontologists will argue it is unethical to kill because such an action cannot be made universal, and it therefore fails to pass the categorical imperative, Levinas would argue that this reasoning is secondary. If we turn to utilitarianism, killing can be rationally supported if it results in an increasing amount of happiness for the majority. Levinas argues that already inherent in the face, before any rational deliberation, is this command, or if we want to abide by traditional ethical language we could call it a "categorical imperative," of "you shall not kill." Kant and other ethical thinkers have mistakenly placed ethics in the world of what Levinas distinguishes between the *said*, which is the

⁵⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 251.

world of thought, rationality and reason, whereas with Levinas it is in the primary world of the *saying*, of concrete lived action and communication. It is ethics that founds and grounds rationality rather than vice versa, thus his proclamation of “ethics as first philosophy.” As of this, we see that Levinas’ ethics has its foundation in *praxis* over theory and can therefore help to bridge the troublesome gap between these two that most of the tradition, in ethics and wider philosophy, has failed to close. It is, as Diane Perpich argues, an ethical theory that offers us “normativity without norms.”⁵¹ Ethics is not to be found in normative frameworks, theoretical definitions or grand systems but it is “entirely here and related to us....We do not conceive of relations, we are in relation.”⁵² Levinas brings ethics back into our concrete everyday lived experience and we can therefore begin to see how it can serve as a response to a tradition which has relegated it to but a branch of philosophy.

A Response to the Crisis

This placing of ethics in the primary world of the concrete and everyday is why the ethical sceptic can have no place in Levinas’ theory: to deny ethics is to deny the everyday, language, knowledge and norms, my subjectivity and all social relations. But Levinas does take the sceptical challenge seriously, as we have seen in his questioning of “whether we are not duped by morality.” As with Descartes, Levinas could certainly not be classed as a sceptic but he does see the use for scepticism as a tool. Scepticism can be positive and advantageous for philosophy because without it a totality, which Levinas’ classed as dogmatism, might be reached and we could get lost in the *said*. Scepticism always confronts these two notions which have been taken as granted in philosophical tradition and we therefore see its necessity. Rather than a closed totality which proclaims eternal and objective truth, Levinas seeks an infinite openness and for this scepticism is necessary. This should not be viewed as a negative because this infinite ethical responsibility allows us to transcend our own finitude and being. Ethics, and wider philosophy,

⁵¹ Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 126.

⁵² Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 140.

has never successfully managed to shake off the sceptic: from Pyrrho, to Hume, Nietzsche and Mackie. But now, with our Levinasian understanding of the primacy and foundation of ethics, which reveals an infinite openness, the sceptical challenge is no longer conceived as a problem but a tool that must be utilised and is necessary for knowledge. An objective ethical framework can never be reached for ethics is an infinite task; “there is no end.”⁵³

Levinas also offers a response to the analytical critique and metaethical concerns such as the attempt to define the Good. As an ethical philosopher, it at first seems strange that Levinas is in agreement with the logicians, who were hostile to ethics, that the Good is transcendent and lies beyond our understanding. He argues that a perfect definition or understanding of such notions as “morality,” “virtue” or the “Good” can never be reached as our world and its meaning are always changing and we should therefore not waste our time discussing such matters. But whereas for the logicians this leads to an abandonment, or at least a deep relegation of the importance, of ethics, for Levinas such an abandonment or degradation is a neglect of our now revealed inherent ethical being. This misunderstanding has not only led to the crisis of ethics but can be seen as a contributor to the wider crisis of European humanity in both its thought and practice. The logicians are right that we should not spend so much time discussing ethical definitions or the limitations of language but they misunderstand, as the majority of tradition has, that real ethical matters, ones that could lead to a state of peace, are concerned instead with our everyday relations with Others that we meet in the face-to-face meeting. Peace is achieved through taking up responsibility and care for the Other which is revealed in this face-to-face meeting rather than in normative theory or logical concerns. Quoting Vasily Grossman, Levinas states that “there is neither God nor the Good, but there is goodness.”⁵⁴ Hunger, war, violence, poverty, responsibility, clothing, shelter and enjoyment; these are Levinas’ ethical concerns and isn’t this more of an ethics that speaks to us as humans? Philosophy must return to immedi-

⁵³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 44.

⁵⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 89.

ate concerns and the world of *praxis*; by recognising ethics as first philosophy we do not lose the ideal of a *universal practical philosophy* but reestablish its very possibility.

Any problem of language concerning ethics can also be avoided, for Levinas reveals language is itself inherently ethical. Language comes from the face-to-face meeting and this is an ethical relation. Communication begins with the very appearance of another upon my horizon and the first thing that is communicated is the primordial ethical command of “you shall not kill.” If we are to accept the primacy of ethics, the crisis of ethics that appeared with the rise of analytical philosophy no longer confronts us. Ethics is there from the very start and we are wholly ethical beings. Every word we speak, every action we undertake and every relation we find ourselves in is rooted in the face-to-face meeting and this is primarily ethical. The so-called “crisis of ethics” is a simple misunderstanding and neglect of this. The only crisis that we can speak of is this very neglect and misunderstanding of ethics, which in turn has fuelled other crises, rather than a crisis of ethics itself.

Conclusion

The moral philosopher Bernard Williams describes ethics as “how one should live,”⁵⁵ whereas for Levinas ethics is *living itself*. Williams, who can be seen as describing the typical traditional view of ethics, from Socrates to Singer, mistakes the theoretical form of ethics with the practical ethics that we meet in our everyday relations and which has now been revealed as primary. It is this misunderstanding of the foundational role of ethics which has been the root of the crisis that has plagued it throughout its history. Morality is always there, omnipresent and inescapable. Ethics is not a theory or normative framework; it is our everyday practical actions. The primacy of ethics can therefore be seen to solve many of the problems and crises that occurred, and still do today, in ethics. If we take Levinas seriously, ethics is there from the very beginning, revealed in the face-to-face meeting that occurs in our everyday lived experience. It cannot be relegated to a secondary branch of philosophy. There is no escaping ethics, we are ethical beings and we no

⁵⁵ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2011), 5.

longer have to rely upon some transcendental or universal source for its foundation. Before any totality or system is conceived, or even possible, we are first in an ethical encounter with the Other who, with their very presence and communication, bring an ethical challenge as soon as they appear and to which we must respond to. Levinas' ethics begins not from a normative or universal foundation but from the utterly particular, and it is from this that universality is reached. It is unique and unlike any other ethical or philosophical system that we find in our history and can offer an escape from the ethical crisis.