1. Introduction: Levinas’s Challenges

Levinas is one of the most discussed French philosophers in recent years. His popularity is not only due to his close affinity with the phenomenology movement, but also his ambition to reverse the tradition of Western philosophy with a provocative thought—metaphysics as first philosophy. In this paper, my subject is his ethics—a face-to-face ethics, as well as an ethics that calls for the infinite responsibility toward the Other. However, I believe, there are two challenges facing Levinas’s ethics. It is often complained that Levinas does not really talk about an ethics, for his ethics is quite different from the way people usually perceive it. In other words, is it worth the name ethics? This is the first challenge. Besides, there is a huge tension between ethics and politics in Levinas’s mind, for he argues that political justice is the “first violence” and therefore a breach of ethics. It is widely believed that politics is a necessary test for ethics. If an ethical doctrine is indifferent to the mundane, it is merely a plaything of abstract minds; this, I believe, is also Levinas’s belief. But, does Levinas’s face-to-face ethics allow a passage to politics? Can we found a politics on his ethics? This is the second challenge. These two challenges constitute the main themes of this paper. I will deal with them one by one.

In this paper, I suggest that we should read Levinas in a new way, not as a post-Husserlian or post-Heideggerian, but as a Kantian. In bringing out his affinity with Kant, I believe, that we can appreciate the potential of his ethics better. By doing this, we can see how close his idea of the infinite responsibility toward the Other is to Kantian deontology; besides, we can also get to understand how his idea of heteronomy is able to serve as a moral principle. Hence, I argue that Levinas’s ethics is viable and is worth the name ethics. Besides, I examine the so-called hiatus between ethics and politics in Levinas’s thought. I argue that we can derive a political doctrine—the principle of humanity—from Levinas’s ethics, which can serve as the bridge between his ethics and politics. In the end, I argue that there is a possibility of a discursive politics in Levinas’s ethics, which, I believe, can be a very interesting comparison to the tradition of Kantian public reason.

1 In this paper, I usually use “Other” (autrui, the personal other) instead of “other” (autre), for I refer it to the personal other most of the time.
2. The Ethics of Levinas

Rorty once talked about Levinas; he complained that Levinas’s ethics does not make sense, which, he believes, is not ethics at all. Ethics that offers us guidance and helps us make decisions, which Rorty believes, is worth the name ethics. Rorty’s doubt is never exceptional. People who are used to the traditional classification of ethics (for example, metaethics, moral theory, and applied ethics) will also find themselves hard to locate Levinas’s ethics. It seems hard to derive any moral principle from Levinas’s ethics. But I believe that this comment does not do justice to Levinas’s ethics. In order to make sense of his ethics, we need to take a closer look at his ideas and the trajectory of his thoughts.

Regarding this, Derrida reminds us to take precaution—Levinas is not using the term ethics in its ordinary sense and is actually proposing an ethics of ethics, which is not an ethics, but the ethics. In Derrida’s eye, Levinas’s project is a metaphysical resistance to ontology and a challenge to the primacy of being. In “Violence and Metaphysics”—one of the first introductions of Levinas’s thought in France—Derrida admires Levinas’s attempt to challenge “the violence of light” that has long dominated Western philosophy, and that is exactly where “Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble.” But he doubts that Levinas can escape the enchantment of being, for the language Levinas uses cannot show us the idea of infinity positively but merely in a negative way. Derrida explains:

To say that the infinite exteriority of the other is not spatial, is non-exteriority and non-interiority, to be unable to designate it otherwise than negatively—is this not to acknowledge that the infinite (also designated negatively in its current positivity: in-finite) cannot be stated?

He believes that the negativity of Levinas’s language is exactly the limit of language. In other words, Levinas’s philosophical language has betrayed his intention right away. Hence Derrida believes that if one thinks as Levinas does, “one must renounce all language, and first of all the words infinite and other.” In this essay, Derrida is basically reading Levinas as a phenomenologist, or, a post-Husserlian as well as a post-Heideggerian, which is correct in a certain sense, but I believe that this reading does not show us the potential and the insight of Levinas’s ethics either.

I suggest that we should read Levinas in another way. What if we do not read

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2 Rorty, “Response to Simon Critchley,” p. 42
4 Ibid., p. 141
5 Ibid., p. 142
Levinas as a post-Husserlian or a post-Heideggerian, rather, as a Kantian? I argue that reading Levinas from a Kantian perspective is one of the possibilities to bring out his ethical insight, one possibility of taking him as an ethicist, an ethicist in its ordinary sense. In order to do that, we have to clarify three points:

1) What is the relation between Levinas and Kant?
2) Is Levinas a deontologist?
3) What is Levinas’s moral principle?

If we can clarify these points and questions, I believe that we can answer the first challenge posed to Levinas.

2.1. The Kant in Levinas

In his early work, such as *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, including his introductory book of Husserl’s phenomenology, Levinas has cast doubts on ontology and being already, but his immense concern for ethics is not yet explicit. It is as though he is not satisfied with where he is coming from (Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology), but he is still not sure of where to depart for. It is hard to tell when the transition took place. But one of his early essays, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” gives us some hints. This essay is a criticism of Heideggerian ontology through and through, in which, Levinas argues that fundamental ontology is not fundamental. What is more fundamental? It is the face of the Other. Levinas calls the relation with the Other religion—a term he continues to use in his later work—but the key word ethics has not appeared; he only alludes to it, in a section title—“The Ethical Meaning of the Other.”

What interests me, is his two statements about Kant. The first one is about the meaning of the term religion. Levinas claims that there is no theology or mysticism behind what he means by religion. His idea of religion simply indicates “the relation between men, irreducible to understanding, is by that very fact distanced from the exercise of power, but in human faces joins the Infinite,” which is close to Kant’s rational theology. In this passage, he seems to allude to Kant’s ideas of kingdom of ends. Further, he invokes Kant again in defending why the signifying of the face opposes to understanding and meaning grasped on the basis of the horizon; he admits, “[w]hat I catch sight of in that sphere seems suggested by the practical philosophy of Kant, to which I feel particularly close.”

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6 Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” p. 8
7 Ibid., p. 10
I believe that these two passages offer us a clue to Levinas’s transition to ethics and his affinity with Kant. But I do not intend to amplify Kant’s influence, for Levinas can be very critical of Kant also. I simply want to call attention to Levinas’s affinity with Kant, an affinity that is often neglected. It would not be wrong to assert that Levinas shares much of the goal of Kant’s moral enterprise. Doesn’t Levinas share with Kant the belief that practical reason is superior to theoretical reason? Aren’t both of them skeptical of the possibility of our understanding to approach transcendence? Wouldn’t they agree that every human being is an end in itself and we have obligation to respect that? I think that is why Levinas feels himself “particularly close” to Kant’s practical philosophy.

But Levinas does not mention this affinity in his ensuing major philosophical works, particularly *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, although he alludes to Kant in several passages. Does this imply that Kant is no longer important in Levinas’s mature thought? Not at all. The influence of Kant is everywhere, especially on Levinas’s idea of the face and the Other. In an interview entitled “Reality has Weight,” Levinas says:

I like the second formulation of the second categorical imperative, the one that tells [me] to respect man in myself when I respect the other. In this expression, we are not in pure universality, but already in the presence of the other.\(^8\)

It is not a coincidence that Levinas finds his idea of the Other close to Kant’s idea of humanity. The encounter with Kant’s idea goes way back to his days in a POW camp during the WWII. Levinas recalls a dog named Bobby in the POW camp:

He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we are men ….

This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives.\(^9\)

In this passage, Levinas has two points. First, the highness of humanity is universal, even a POW has inviolable rights that need no proof from anyone; this is undoubtedly a Kantian thesis. Second, Levinas argues that the respect for humanity shines in the encounter with the Other, in seeing and greeting the face. The second point is actually an adjustment of Kant’s doctrine. Levinas believes that the respect for humanity does not come from the respect for moral principle but from the encounter with the Other, in other words, not from will but from sensibility. This is a phenomenological revolt against Kant’s moral doctrine. But this revolt is not possible without the foundation

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\(^8\) Levinas, “Reality has Weight,” p. 163

\(^9\) Levinas, “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights,” p. 153
that Kant has laid down.

2.2. The Unlikely Deontology: Facing the Other

Though with a close affinity, the split between Levinas and Kant is hard to ignore. Levinas adopts a method that places sensibility prior to understanding, even will; he is subscribed to the method of phenomenology, which is manifested by Husserl’s famous motto—back to things themselves. Through what do we feel immediately the highness, the holiness, and the goodness? For Kant, it is our free will, and for Levinas, it is through the encounter with the face of the Other. That is why Levinas claims that the face of the Other is the original site of the sensible.\(^{10}\) If we rephrase Husserl’s words and coin a motto for Levinas’s ethics, it would probably be “back to the face itself.”

But what is exactly the face? Levinas has made it clear that the face is not the vision or visibility of a face; it is not the color of the eyes or the skin we see. The face is an encounter prior to our understanding and will. It comes to us through our sensibility. As Levinas says: “the world of perception shows a face; things affect us as possessed by the other person.”\(^ {11}\) In other words, we do not grasp or comprehend the face; on the contrary, we are affected by it. To approach the face through our understanding is violence, for the face is beyond our freedom and power, or in other words, it is “exceeding the idea of the other in me.”\(^ {12}\) For Levinas, the only peaceful way to approach the face is language and discourse. The epiphany of a face is wholly language.\(^ {13}\)

The face is what calls for our responsibility. In “Is Ontology Fundamental?” Levinas is still not sure if a thing (such as a painting) has a face, and he admits that he has no answer yet.\(^ {14}\) It is much clear in his later mature thought. The face is a being or “otherwise than being” capable of responsibility. The face speaks to us. But, as he often says, the face is de-faced, for if we have any concrete image (such as the color of the eyes and the skin) of the face, the face is subjected to our power. Before the encounter with the face, with the Other, our presupposition or preunderstanding must be suspended.

It is worth our attention that Levinas claims, in responsibility “I am brought to my final reality,” and in seeking my final reality, I will find my existence as a “thing

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\(^ {10}\) Levinas, “Ethics as First philosophy,” p. 82

\(^ {11}\) Levinas, “The I and the Totality,” p. 17

\(^ {12}\) Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p. 50

\(^ {13}\) Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” p. 55

\(^ {14}\) “Is Ontology Fundamental?” p. 10
The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being in another sense: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response—acuteness of the present—engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality. In recognizing the transcendence of the face that is beyond our understanding, as well as in respecting the alterity of the Other who is outside of my power, I feel the highness of humanity, which raises me to the level of “thing in itself,” as if I were living in the kingdom of ends. But we do not approach the kingdom of ends through willing our maxims to be universal, but through taking infinite responsibility for the Other. It is said that the distinction between Kant and Levinas comes from the recognition of two different facts: the fact of reason, and the fact of the face. The comparison is quite good, for it points out exactly that in their ethics the source of morality is different—one from the free will, and one from sensibility.

Can we therefore say that Levinas is a deontologist, if not a deontologist in a Kantian sense? If we retrieve the meaning of the term deontology, a doctrine of duty or obligation, can we say that Levinas is a deontologist that reminds us the necessity of the infinite responsibility toward the Other? If that is the case, I believe that Levinas is a deontologist through and through.

2.3. Heteronomy as a Moral Principle

The gist of deontology does not merely mean that we ought to respect our moral duty, but respect it categorically. If the respect is derived from something else than itself, it is conditional and hypothetical. This is the supreme principle of Kant’s ethics—the principle of autonomy. In other words, autonomy means self-legislation, which is the opposite of heteronomy. For Kant, heteronomy means legislating not for the sake of the respect for the law but for something else, such as happiness or any personal preference.

It is quite interesting that Levinas often claims that his own ethical idea is heteronomy, not autonomy, which seems to mark another break with Kant. But the point is—Levinas’s idea of heteronomy is not exactly what Kant means by it.

15 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 178
16 Critchley, “Five Problems in Levinas’s Views of Politics and a Sketch of a Solution to Them,” p. 180
17 Kant’s own definition of the principle of autonomy: “to choose only in such a way that the maxims of your choice are also included as universal law in the same volition.” (*Kant, Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 89)
Levinas’s heteronomy is unconditional and infinite, and it is not done for self-interest or servitude, but for the welcome of the Other, which is what he means by the humanism of the Other. Autonomy, as Levinas construes it, is a humanism of the Same, the obsession with one’s freedom, and a Narcissism. Hence Levinas states:

Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus. 18

Isn’t this idea of autonomy not Kant’s idea of autonomy either? Hence it is not exactly correct to oppose Kant’s idea of autonomy to Levinas’s idea of heteronomy. This casual opposition tends to disregard Levinas’s affinity with Kant and the possibility for thinking Levinas as a deontologist in his own sense.

Levinas’s heteronomy is a moral principle. The principle of heteronomy demands us to suspend our freedom before the presence of the Other. It is a calling into question of my being and my right to be. Hence, Levinas argues that to be or not to be is not the question; the real question is how being justifies itself. 19 However, Levinas values freedom, but not a freedom as unencumbrance; rather, he values a freedom that is finite and invested with the weight of the Other. Therefore he says:

Existence is not condemned to freedom, but judged and invested as a freedom. Freedom could not present itself all naked. This investiture of freedom constitutes moral life itself, which is through and through a heteronomy. 20

For Levinas, heteronomy is charity, mercy and love. In welcoming the face of the Other, a sublime demand comes to us—“Thou shall not kill” (one of Levinas’s favorite quotes from the Bible). Our freedom is not sacrificed for the demand; we are invested with freedom by this demand.

Meanwhile, Levinas redefines the idea of subjectivity. In Totality and Infinity, he claims that “the subject is a host.” 21 Subjectivity is hospitality and the welcoming of the face of the other, which is quite different from a narcissist subjectivity or a Dasein anxious for his death. This asymmetrical relation between the subject and the Other is even pushed to the extreme later. In Otherwise than Being, Levinas claims that “subjectivity is being hostage.” 22 It is a great leap from being a “host” to being a “hostage.” In “being hostage,” we are obsessed with the Other, and we are being

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18 “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” p.49
19 Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” p. 86
20 “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” p. 58
21 Totality and Infinity, p. 299
22 Otherwise than Being—Or Beyond Essence, p. 127
substituted for the Other. It is like what Levinas says in “Ethics as First Philosophy:”

It is the responsibility of a hostage which can be carried to the point of being substituted for the other person and demands an infinite subjection of subjectivity.23

However, the “infinite subjection of subjectivity” is not to abandon our freedom or the right of our being. It is an infinite calling into question of our self-centered freedom.

3. From Ethics to Politics

As for the relation between ethics and politics, Levinas believes that “politics must be held in check by ethics.”24 But, how? Levinas never elaborates on this point. It is therefore widely believed that there is an immense hiatus between Levinas’s ethics and politics; that is to say, Levinas’s ethics is unable to found a politics. In “A Word of Welcome,” Derrida discusses two ideas of hospitality—a Levinasian ethics of hospitality, and a Kantian law or politics of hospitality. Derrida believes that there is no assured passage from the ethics of hospitality to the politics of hospitality.25 In other words, there is a “hiatus” (which is Derrida’s term) between ethics and politics in Levinas’s thought. But Derrida is not pessimistic about it at all—he believes that the hiatus does not signify a failure; rather, the hiatus in effect requires us to think politics otherwise.26 I believe that Derrida is too optimistic about it. If the immense hiatus exists, how can we think politics otherwise from the perspective of ethics? In Levinas’s thought, ethics is to think otherwise than politics, which is always separated from to think politics otherwise. If we want to think politics otherwise, a transition from ethics to politics is required.27 But this assured transition is not clear in Levinas’s ethics.

The hiatus between ethics and politics can be a problem to Levinas. Levinas upholds an ethics that is altruistic to the extreme—I am always responsible for the Other, even it is not me who makes the Other suffers. This is what Levinas means by substitution—we are being substituted for the Other, like the Passion of the Christ! It is almost impossible to found a politics on the basis of this kind of altruism. If it is destined to be infeasible, it is an ethics already ripe for betrayal. It is interesting that when Levinas has the chance to talk about real politics, he sometimes can sound

23 Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” p. 84
24 Levinas, “Being-Toward-Death and ‘Thou Shall Not Kill’,” p. 132
26 Ibid.
27 Derrida also thinks that there needs to be a transition. He clearly sees the tension between a Levinasian ethics of hospitality and a Kantian law or politics of hospitality. It is decision that stands in between. It is a Derridean decisionism, but I am not able to deal with the details here.
pretty un-Levinasian. One of the famous examples is his attitude toward the Palestinian people. In 1982, when he was asked about whether the Palestinian is the Other for the Israeli, he said:

   My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbor, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you’re for the other, you’re for the neighbor. But if your neighbor attacks another neighbor or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.28

The claim “in alterity we can find an enemy” sounds quite un-Levinasian. Levinas even seems to imply that although the Palestinian can be the neighbor, they are not necessarily the Other to the Israeli. How do we differentiate a friend from an enemy? How do we tell right from wrong? The political principle is simply missing. Levinas’s principle of heteronomy does not help much either. This altruistic moral principle is always ripe for betrayal. We seem to be bound in a dilemma—one is either a good saint or a bad politician. That is why we need a transition, a political doctrine that makes the transition possible. Without a viable political doctrine, Levinas’s belief, “politics must be held in check by politics,” is not possible. In order to found a politics on the basis of Levinas’s ethics, we need to clarify three points as well:

1) What is Levinas’s idea of politics, that is, the question of the third?
2) Can we derive a political doctrine from Levinasian ethics?
3) Is it possible to found a political theory on Levinasian ethics?

I believe that these points are the key to the solution of the second challenge posed to Levinas. In the following sections, I will discuss them in order.

3.1. Justice and the Third

   In a face-to-face encounter with the Other, there is no need for politics. For between the I and the Other, there is only an infinite responsibility toward the Other. Politics begins when there is the third. The third is another Other, another face. When there is the third, the call for justice emerges. Levinas says:

   The other was precisely what I call the “face.” For me, he is singular. When the third appears, the other’s singularity is placed in question. I must look him in the face as well. One must, then, compare the incomparable. For me, this is the Greek moment in our

28 Levinas, “Ethics and Politics,” p. 294
The presence of the third causes a problem: which Other first? Therefore is the call for justice. The task of justice is to compare the incomparable. Levinas thinks that is where the Greek wisdom begins. In this passage, he makes an interesting comparison, which implies how different ethics and politics mean to him—the Greek wisdom means justice and politics to him, and the Bible means ethics. The work of justice requires a political order and the state. In the realm of justice, the singularity of the Other is suspended and is placed under a common measure. He says:

Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneous, assembling, order, thematisation, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality the intelligibility of a system and the intellect and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice.

Therefore he calls justice the “first violence.” For the singularity of the Other is suspended before a court of justice.

Besides, Levinas seems to support the thesis that politics is a temporary suspension of the face—the moral primacy of the face does not vanish when justice and politics begin, and it is just temporarily suspended. Hence Levinas says, “[t]he political order—insti tutions and justice—relieve this incessant responsibility, but for the political order, for the good political order, we are still responsible.” Politics simply relieves our incessant responsibility toward the Other, but our responsibility never ends. This is Levinas’s attitude toward the problem of evil. In the realm of ethics, Levinas is a pacifist through and through, but in the realm of politics, Levinas sometimes to support a just war theory. If this is the case, his statement, “in alterity we can find an enemy,” will be less astonishing to us. Another example is his comment on the necessity of the coercive power of the state

When I speak of justice, I introduce the idea of the struggle with evil; I separate myself from the idea of non-resistance to evil. If self-defense is problematic, the executioner is the one who threatens the belligerent neighbor and calls down violence: in this sense, he no longer has a face …. There is a certain measure of violence necessary starting from justice, but if one speaks of justice, it is necessary to admit judges: it is necessary to admit institutions and the State, to live in a world of citizens and not only in the order of the face-to-face. But on the other hand, it is starting from the relation to the face, from me before the face of the other, that we can speak of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the

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29 “Being-Toward-Death and ‘Thou Shall Not Kill’,” p.133
30 Otherwise than Being—Or Beyond Essence, p. 157
31 Levinas, “Interview with François Poirie,” pp. 55-6
32 Ibid., p. 53
Levinas does not oppose the use of public coercive power. He agrees that the role of an executioner is necessary, which is for the defense for the neighbor. In this case, the executioner “no longer has a face,” which seems to assert the thesis that politics is a temporary suspension of the face. But this suspension does not cancel our responsibility toward the face; the legitimacy of the state is derived from the responsibility toward the face of the Other. We can therefore conclude that Levinas’s idea of the third is actually a justification of the necessity of politics.

3.2. The Respect for Humanity as a Political Doctrine

Even though Levinas asserts the necessity of politics, but he does not elaborate on any specific political doctrine. I believe that a viable political doctrine is the key to the transition from his ethics to politics. Can we derive a political doctrine from him? Levinas has left us clues. I argue that the respect for humanity is the key. Levinas has mentioned from time to time that we must respect the Other as an end in itself. It is an end in itself, for the face evades the reach of my power and understanding, and in the transcendence of the face, God comes to us. For Levinas, humanity is the third, and its highness comes from the transcendence of the face. There is no denying that Levinas’s idea of humanity has a theological overtone, which is clear in his idea of humanity as fraternity:

The status of the human implies fraternity and the idea of the human race. Fraternity is radically opposed to the conception of a humanity united by resemblance, a multiplicity of diverse families arisen from the stones cast behind by Deucalion …. It [fraternity] involves the commonness of a father, as though the commonness of race would not bring together enough …. Monotheism signifies this human kinship, this idea of a human race that refers back to the approach of the Other in the face, in a dimension of height, in responsibility for oneself and for the Other.34

For Levinas, humanity involves the commonness of a father, a monotheism. Indeed, it is hard to ignore Levinas’s connection with Judeo-Christian theology. He is a renowned Talmud scholar. Even his philosophical work is filled with Biblical quotes. Most important of all, his ethics is closely related to theology. According to Derrida, Levinas once told him that what really interests him in the end is “not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy.”35 This does not mean that Levinas

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33 Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” p.167
34 Totality and Infinity, p. 214
35 Derrida, “Adieu,” p. 4
does not care about ethics at all, but in the end, not ethics alone. If, for Kant, theology is a continuation of practical philosophy, it is certainly not incorrect to say the opposite about Levinas—ethics is a continuation of theology.

If it is the case, does the theological overtone compromise Levinas’s ethics and the possibility for a political doctrine? It seems not a problem to Levinas. He believes that he separates theology from philosophy very well. Or in his words, his philosophy is simply offering “a theology without a theodicy” as well as “a religion without preaching.” He uses theological terms like God, monotheism, religion and epiphany from time to time, but there is no theodicy behind them. For example, in “Is Ontology Fundamental?” he describes the relation with the Other as religion. It is religion in the sense that the relation between the I and the Other cannot be fully grasped in the sphere of knowledge; in other words, the alterity of the Other is beyond our understanding. Hence he claims that there is no theology, no mysticism concealed behind his analysis of the ethical meaning of the Other.

Therefore, I suggest that we suspend the theological implication of Levinas’s idea of humanity (not to cancel it, for there is no contradiction between it and the political doctrine that I try to convey here). Let us interpret humanity as a politico-ethical idea. I argue that the respect for humanity can be the political doctrine that channels his ethics and politics. I call this respect for humanity the principle of humanity. It contains two theses—the respect for human rights and the right of humanitarian intervention—which I believe, is consistent with Levinas’s ethics. In “The Rights of the Other Man,” Levinas upholds a thesis—to respect human rights is always to respect the Other’s rights—in which, he feels pretty close to Kant, especially Kant’s principle of humanity. Besides, the introduction of the idea of the third into his ethics also makes the idea of humanitarian intervention possible, which is clear in the previous section. Levinas is not a political pacifist, and he does not subscribe to an idea of non-resistance to evil. But the resistance to evil is not for the security of my rights, but for the Other’s rights, the third’s rights. If my analysis is correct, Levinas seems to me to be closer to Kant than people usually think.

4. Concluding Remarks

In the previous sections, I have discussed a reading of Levinas’s ethics and politics from a Kantian perspective. I believe that the trajectory of the development of

36 Levinas, “Intention, Event, and the Other,” p. 146
37 He claims: “The respect for the other in the respectful will of the Intelligible, or, following Kant’s formulation, the possibility for the will to treat the other in its decisions always as an end, or never simply as a means.” (Levinas, “The Rights of the Other Man,” p. 148)
Levinas’s ethics is closely related to Kant. In the process of deriving a possible political doctrine from Levinas’s ethics, I also find the similarity in their idea of humanity—both of them support the thesis of the respect for human rights as well as the necessity for a politics of humanitarian intervention. By reading Levinas from a Kantian perspective, I argue that the challenges posed to Levinas can be solved.

My further question is—can we derive a political theory from Levinas’s ethics? I believe that we can find a possibility for a Levinasian discursive politics. Levinas argues that the only peaceful way to approach the Other is language, or discourse. In discourse, the alterity of the Other is not dissolved by my consciousness. He explains:

Language is not enacted within a consciousness; it comes to me from the Other and reverberates in consciousness by putting it in question. This event is irreducible to consciousness, where everything comes about from within—even the strangeness of suffering....The originality of discourse with respect to constitutive intentionality, to pure consciousness, destroys the concept of immanence: the idea of infinity in consciousness is an overflowing of a consciousness whose incarnation offers new powers to a soul no longer paralytic—powers of welcome, of gift, of full hands, of hospitality.38

In welcoming the Other, we take the Other as an interlocutor. That is why Levinas thinks that language is hospitality. Only in discourse or conversation, the transcendence and alterity of the Other is respected and welcomed. This kind of discursive politics is different from the idea of the public use of reason of Kant. For Kant, the purpose of the free public use of reason is enlightenment, which calls for a court of reason to examine our thoughts, and it tends to lead the multiplicity of disagreements to a rational consensus. It is neither like Habermas’s deliberative politics and discourse ethics. Levinas’s discursive politics does not aim to achieve any consensus. He says:

Communication is an adventure of a subjectivity, different from that which is dominated by the concern to recover itself, different from that of coinciding in consciousness; it will involve uncertainty.39

There is no promised consensus in Levinas’s discursive politics. It is a communication without a destination, and therefore it is an adventure for the interlocutor.

Levinas’s discursive politics is a politics without an agenda, a politics that demand us to face the Other, to respect the alterity of the Other. It therefore promotes

38 Totality and Infinity, pp. 204-5
39 Otherwise than Being—Or Beyond Essence, p. 120
the idea of pluralism, not a liberal pluralism, but a pluralism in Levinas’s sense—to respect the multiplicity of singularity in humanity.

Reference


