Living at the Margins of Life:
Encountering the Other and Doing Theology

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Abstract: This article gives a Levinasian-inspired analysis of ethics at the margins of life. It begins by considering our present day obsession with technology and how it depersonalises the human condition, creating self-centredness. The concept of ethical transcendence is the basis in which the language of theology might be truly used beyond ontology, phenomenology and the category of objectivity. The ideas of the face, encounter, passivity, exposure and transcendence are the basis for a theological language of alterity. The Other or, the poor ones at the margins of life, precedes our knowledge, commitment and practice. The face of the Other is like a trauma that awakens, commands and ordains us to responsibility to the point of expiation, even exposing us and sharing in their wounds. Testifying for the Other’s wounds and outrage is glory in the sense of witnessing to both Christ and those at the margins of society.

Key Words: Emmanuel Levinas; otherness; alterity; ethical transcendence; Christ as other; Christ’s presence in the vulnerable; Christ at the margins

In Australia, most of us live on the fringes of the mainland. We are drawn to these margins of the coast to live, to rest and to seek leisure. In so doing, we are lost to the magnitude of the Australian land. Most of the time, our sacred land is forgotten. We tend to measure ourselves through socio-cultural values, prosperity, work, family life, friends and the enjoyment of music and sport. In effect, these become our “margins of life”, the very bad faith in which we live. It is bad faith for we are constantly forgetful that these margins contract our lives. For the most part, we focus upon my need, my possibilities and my death. Everything revolves around my desire, my fears and my needs. As a result, the way we live and the way we define ourselves lock us into margins or narrow and selfish ways of life, blinding us to our great possibilities of encountering the people who truly live at the margins of life.

Western technology has made us more and more anonymous to each other. We can now communicate so swiftly that we no longer have to engage with each other face to face. The computer and the internet objectify us as ghosts, lost in the presence of communication. We are like ghosts because even though we may express ourselves personally in an email, we nevertheless have our faces hidden. We are lost because we do not know a way out of the impersonal world of technology. Its presence overwhelms us and turns us into spectres of the night. While we haunt our neighbour with endless emails and internet conversations, we forget about reserving a blessing for him and her. Can we see their face and hear their cry? We may experience their words, but we will never really encounter them. We are left with objective and impersonal experiences that transform our consciousness into spectres. Western technology in all its wonder and celebration of
human knowledge has made us more and more forgetful of each other and above all those who are truly on the margins of society.

St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians has reminded us that the true wisdom of God is beyond our consciousness and personal experience. He remarks:

But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor 2:9-11)

If we really want to have the eyes of faith, hear the word of God and to have a heart, then we must allow our human spirit to be overwhelmed by the Spirit of God. We are called to an openness in which those at the margins of society have priority. Our eyes, ears and hearts have to be opened. We will remain blind, deaf and heartless to the extent that we seek our own possibilities for advancement, wealth and good fortune. Even if we seek to develop our own talents for the good of society, we none the less bury them in our ever jealous ego. The Spirit of God is otherwise than our experience, our consciousness and our self-centred feelings. When we care only for our own precious things in the world, not only do we ignore our human spirit, but we also ignore the Spirit of God. It is like we live in a different space and time. None the less, the Spirit of God is among us, ever searching for ways out of the depths of God to draw us into the life of God.

The face of the Other, namely the orphan, widow and stranger, is beyond our intentional consciousness. We have learnt that the Lord "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and... loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing" (Deut 10:18). Accordingly, they are not "something" that we can reduce our knowledge and experience to. They are also not "nothing" for our lives. Rather, they are the very donation in which the Lord God is signified. But their cries have not been heard in the experience of our lives. Moreover, the word of God cries out for them in the realm otherwise than the "interest" of our self-interested lives.

Too often we confuse our "interest" or our "being" with divine Being and too often we allow the language of ontology to take over theology. The idea of Being, whether it is understood as essence, interest, an event or even God, is nevertheless an "idea" that too often leans towards a cold and factual objectivity. We see this in our statements about God, that it, our thematisations that are often devoid of feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger. Ontology in its every tendency to objectify God, humanity and the world leaves little room to articulate a theology centred on subjectivity, above all an ethical subjectivity.

Phenomenology too faces the same kind of problem. Here, the focus is on consciousness of the mind and its relation to an object. The mind takes precedence over the heart and spirit. It views itself as free to take responsibility by discovering the meaning of something. Even though there are associated emotions like anger, joy and desire with every act of experiencing something in the world through the senses, the phenomenological focus is on the object and moreover on modifying the object in consciousness.

Together, ontology and phenomenology do not bring us any further to the presence of the Other or the poor one. Whilst ontology might speak of the Other as a relation to Being and phenomenology as an experience in consciousness, we are never the less so far away from encountering the Other. In fact, paradoxically, the Other is a non-presence. The idea of presence is one that has led to the questioning of the relevance of
metaphysics and to the pushing of phenomenology beyond its limits. In reality, we can only be present to things partially and momentarily. For example, such momentary or partial presence may occur when we are stunned by a beautiful picture or touched by the consoling words of a loved one. Such presence is overwhelming and we can only partially partake of it. It is as if for a moment we achieve a partial oneness with the beauty of the picture or are blessed with a healing love that enters the core of our heart, soul, mind and strength. But, for the most part, presence evades us for we are too concerned with objectivity, that is, the relation of our mind and senses to the world.

What we forget about too often is the very world of ethical subjectivity or in a Christian theological sense, the Reign of God. This is a world of moral conscience. It is always a difficult freedom to execute justice for the orphan and the widow, and to love the strangers by providing them food and clothing. It is a difficult freedom to love those who hate us even to the point of taking responsibility for their persecution of us and of others. Ethical subjectivity is an ethical transcendence. If we are to love the poor one and hear the word of God in their face, then there must occur a certain transformation.

The Other is not an object, a personal experience nor an interesting piece of knowledge. In fact, it is the face of the Other, the very poor one, that must shatter our self-interest, our tendencies to compete and to seek success in a world of commerce. But this happens like a thief in the night. From a time and place unknown, we are overwhelmingly surprised to the point of trauma. It is never easy to touch upon the pain and suffering of another. Moreover, in the throws of our life’s work and play, we have been centred on self. As the hidden face of the Other, namely his or her destitution, loneliness and fear of death, evolves in our conscience, we become ordered and ordained to a responsibility which no eye has seen nor ear heard nor heart conceived.

To live at the margins of life signifies ethical subjectivity. At these limits at and beyond our consciousness, the face of the poor one must take priority. It calls for a profound passivity or openness to provide the space and time for the depths of God to call upon us, command us and ordain us to responsible lives. In this way the passivity towards the face and the activity of difficult freedom coincide. However, every advance we make to the poor one is done at a risk of reducing him or her to our personal experiences and knowledge of what is good and true. The risk exists because there is always the danger of objectivity. We can easily allow our mind, senses, consciousness and associated emotions to actively speak and interpret for us and on behalf of the Other, namely the poor one. In contrast, our response must be first a passive one in which we are exposed to the face of the poor one.

Being exposed to the Other is no doubt traumatic. It is traumatic because not only are their wounds exposed to us, but it is as if their wounds become our own haemorrhage. Hence, we bleed in this way for the suffering Other. This signifies that we have been encountered with his or her hunger, oppression and destitution. Notice I am not theologising in the active sense, but trying to use the passive one to emphasise that the language of theology needs to coincide not with objectivity, ontology and phenomenology, but with passivity and alterity, that is, ethical transcendence. Alterity or otherness refers to being made responsible by the Other to such a degree that it overwhelms the intentionality of consciousness. As a result, the self is obliged to sacrifice for the Other to the point of expiation. Again, the language of alterity is always uttered with a risk of falling back into objectivity and presence (the fact of Being).

Looking back at the idea of living at the margins of life, we are confronted with an idea itself. The challenge is not to allow this idea to objectify and subordinate our ethical
subjectivity towards those at the margins of life. The faces of those on these margins of society can truly never be seen nor understood through experience, knowledge nor even practice. This is because this poor one precedes us in the sense that we have already been summoned to a responsibility beyond our personal freedom to choose. I have taken this idea that consciousness is not thematic and precedes both cognition and commitment from Emmanuel Levinas (whose thinking has penetrated my own throughout this paper). Levinas writes:

Consciousness in all its forms – representational, axiological, practical – has already lost this close presence [that is, the very proximity of beings]. The fact that the neighbour does not enter into a theme, that in a certain sense he precedes cognition and commitment, is neither a blinding nor an indifference; it is a rectitude of relationship more tense than intentionality: the neighbour summons me.\(^1\)

Accordingly, once we have responded to what is otherwise than our objective world of Being, we have a chance – albeit at a risk of falling back into objectivity, presence and Being – to have a sense for justice and peace.

Jesus has witnessed to us that, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. Our lives need the depths of God to find us, rupture our consciousness and lead us on to be responsible for the poor ones at the margins of society. I do not know at any one moment whether we can actually testify that our personal experience signifies that we have been poor in spirit and in need of God. But, I think that the face of the Other who dwells on the hither side of consciousness, that is, in the moral conscience or the Reign of God penetrating our hearts and minds, signifies an encounter with God. The encounter is at once an overwhelming trauma that exceeds everyday consciousness. As a result of being exposed to their outrage and wounds, we begin to bleed for the poor ones. Such haemorrhaging draws us on to testify the sacred words, “Here I am!” In this sacred space and time of ethical transcendence we witness to the glory of what no eye has seen nor ear heard nor heart conceived, namely the life of expiation and prayer for the Other. In such a way, we can begin to appreciate that discourse is otherwise than our self-interested lives and begins from and for the person.

Let us not then think of living at the margins of life as an idea, but as transcendence and doing theology. When we are therefore faced by the Other, we can set out to engage the language of theology with ethical transcendence rather than ontology and experience. This will hopefully lead to a theology understood as truly Christian, that is, deriving from an encounter with Christ and with the Other in Christ. In this way of peace and justice, we can testify that the person of Christ is neither a system of totality nor even a personal experience, but is the very depths and glory of God in which the poor one might be fed, clothed and loved.

If we are able to meet the challenge of doing theology through having our egoistic margins of life ruptured by those who truly are on the margins of life, there is indeed hope that all is possible. Even though all might have been lost with past lives of ego-fulfillment and pleasure, everything is possible as God, in the face of the poor one, stirs our heart with the true life of commitment and expiation. Every sacred feeling and every wound are all openings to testify to the glory of God. Within our hearts we can desire such glory, savour its beauty and come to a maturity of doing theology.

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