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# *Reading Ubuntu relationality through a Levinasian lens*

## Abstract

Ubuntu philosophy is a moral framework rooted in African traditions, emphasising interconnectedness, community, and a shared humanity that is based on a relational conceptualisation of the subject. In this article, I argue that Levinas's radically passive ethical agent that operates through affective relationality rather than reason may be employed as instructive lens to lay bare the metaphysical dynamics at play in Ubuntu relationality — something which existing Ubuntu scholarship fails to do. While Ntibagirirwa (2018) argues in favour of conceiving of Ubuntu as a metaphysical concept he does not elucidate how exactly relationality may be accounted for. In other words, he fails to explain *how* and on what basis the metaphysical interconnectedness of the Self and the Other can be realised in the ethical obligation of altruism, which Ubuntu insists upon. A Levinasian reading of Ubuntu, I argue, finds its justification in their common contention that the humanness of the human being can only be verified in moral acts.

**Keywords:** Levinas, Ubuntu, relationality, ethics, metaphysics

## Introducing the argument

Ubuntu philosophy is a moral framework rooted in African traditions, emphasising interconnectedness, community, and a shared humanity that is based

on a relational conceptualisation of the subject. Originating primarily from the Bantu-speaking cultures of southern Africa, Ubuntu is often summarised by the phrases, "I am because we are" or "a person is a person through other persons". Mangena (2012) argues in favour of the use of an Ubuntu moral framework in southern Africa against the application of the three dominant Western normative theories — virtue ethics, deontology and utilitarianism — across cultures given the fact that they place the individual at the centre of morality with reason occupying a central place. After briefly discrediting these dominant Western normative theories as inadequate not only in African contexts but also beyond it, I turn to a critical consideration of Levinas's conceptualisation of ethical agency, which he offers not as an alternative prescriptive moral framework but as a way of understanding what makes ethical action possible. I argue that Levinas's radically passive ethical agent that operates through affective relationality rather than reason may be employed as instructive lens to lay bare the metaphysical dynamics at play in Ubuntu relationality — something which existing Ubuntu scholarship fails to do. While Ntibagirirwa (2018) argues in favour of conceiving of Ubuntu as a metaphysical concept he does not elucidate how exactly relationality may be accounted for. In other words, he fails to explain *how* and on what basis the metaphysical interconnectedness of the Self and the Other can be realised in the ethical obligation of altruism, which Ubuntu insists upon. To make my argument, I outline the development of ethical subjectivity in Levinas's works, which may be conceived in terms of relationality predicated on the notion of radical passivity. This is followed by an exploration of Roger Burggraeve's suggestion that the relational self can be best understood by unearthing Jean Wahl's conceptualisation of the bi-relational dynamics of transcendence and its influence on Levinas's thinking. In the final analysis and to make this dialogue across cultures wholly compelling, an account must be given of how the Levinasian "I am because *you* are" might apply to the Ubuntian "I am because *we* are" given the fact that on the face of things Levinas's sociality is that of the twosome, whereas Ubuntu is in essence a more inclusive and expansive communitarian moral framework. I conclude by assessing to what extent my argument that Levinas's conceptualisation of relational subjectivity might apply to Ubuntu can augment Ntibagirirwa (2018)'s argument. First, however, I address the possible objection that at a meta-ethical level Levinas's ethical metaphysics and Ubuntu are too divergent to be compatible.

## Levinas and Ubuntu: unlikely bedfellows?

Initially Levinas's ethical metaphysics is presented in the form of phenomenological analyses even as he ventures on a trans-phenomenological quest to evade the Other-reductive and totalising ontological tradition of Western philosophy — a venture that is only fully realised in his later mature thought. For its part, Ubuntu is mostly interpreted not as a formal metaphysical or phenomenological account in the technical, systematic sense often found in Western philosophy. However, it does imply a rich understanding of human relationality rooted in the lived experiences, cultural practices, and oral traditions of African societies. These implicit accounts lend themselves to interpretation both through metaphysical and phenomenological lenses. Ubuntu implies a worldview that postulates that being is fundamentally relational. This ontological position suggests that the essence of being human is realised not in isolation but in relationships, contrasting sharply with individualistic conceptions of selfhood. One's humanity is actualised through interaction and interdependence with others. This idea resonates with the Levinasian metaphysical claim that "to be is to be in relation". Like Levinas, then, Ubuntu postulates human relationality as an ontological necessity.

Ubuntu also shares with Levinas the phenomenological stance that connectedness to others is not merely cognitive but deeply emotional or affective and experiential. Acts of kindness such as empathy, compassion or solidarity, for example, affirm one's sense of belonging and personhood whereas indifference or violence against the other or exclusion diminishes one's humanity, demonstrating that relationality is felt directly in human experiences.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned, Ubuntu is primarily a lived philosophy rather than a formal theoretical framework, so it does not explicitly address the mechanisms of relationality in the abstract metaphysical or phenomenological sense. While I am cognisant of the fact that its primary focus is pragmatic with an emphasis on practical ethics and lived communal relationships rather than on abstract metaphysical principles, I nevertheless contend that Levinas's metaphysical account of human relationality might be superimposed on Ubuntu's interconnected subject. What is at stake in the line of argumentation is an attempt to account for Ubuntu's inherent relationality that is prior to and more fundamental than its socially and communally honed relationality. It might be argued that it is this inherent foundational relationality that opens up the self to communal and socio-political responsiveness.

In response to the concern that Ubuntu's status as a practical, prescriptive moral framework ostensibly negates any need for a metaphysical grounding, I contend that every ethic — however concrete its social enactment — presupposes an ontology that makes its norms intelligible and effective. Ubuntu's injunction "I am because we are" not only guides communal conduct but rests upon an unstated metaphysical claim about the nature of personhood itself: that human being is essentially relational and that this relationality is prior to, and constitutive of, moral obligation. My recourse to Levinas's ethical metaphysics is not an arbitrary invocation of Western theory, but an effort to make explicit what Ubuntu's implicit ontology already asserts. As we shall see, Levinas demonstrates that ethical responsiveness — the very capacity to recognise and answer the call of the Other — requires a metaphysical dynamic of radical passivity and bi-relational transcendence that cannot be reduced to social custom or communal convention. By uncovering in Levinas a detailed account of how the subject is ontologically "in relation" before any social norm is imposed, I show that Ubuntu's communal prescriptions depend on an analogous metaphysical structure: the pre-ethical foundational openness of the Self to Others. Without this metaphysical substrate, Ubuntu risks remaining a set of laudable practices unlinked to any deeper account of why — and how — they command moral force.

## Going beyond the three dominant Western schools of ethical thought

Before launching into a sketch of the development of ethical subjectivity in Levinas's works to shed some light on the enigma of ethical responsiveness premised on inter-human relationality and make a case for its applicability to Ubuntu, I want to reiterate my argument — developed in full elsewhere (Hofmeyr 2016) — why I consider the three dominant Western schools of thought as inadequate or ineffective normative frameworks not only in African contexts but also beyond it. The three schools — virtue ethics, utilitarian ethics, and deontological ethics — respectively focus on the person, the outcome, and the action as normative locus for ethical decision-making. Their respective foci are not accidental, but reflect the tripartite structure of ethical judgment:

1. an appropriated or internalised *normative framework* (or principles, which form the locus of deontological approaches), which enables
2. the *rational weighing of better or worse courses of action* in a specific situation (the internalised norms along with the consistency with which these are applied speak to the character of the person, which is the locus of virtue ethics) based on
3. the estimated *impact of this action* (which utilitarian approaches take as decisive for ethical decision-making).

Ethical judgment is so difficult because these three components are rarely, if ever, completely straightforward, and the way they overlap invariably confuses matters when they do seem relatively self-evident. They are in fact shut in an interconnected cross-contaminating loop: instead of serving as solid pillars that form a foolproof foundation for sound ethical judgment, the loop forms a downward spiral. Consequently, ethical decision-making typically boils down to the prima facie weighing of these components against one another, guided by value judgments or consensus rulings. In practice, when we face competing concerns and scarce resources — whether time, means, or our own limited capacity to choose wisely amongst competing imperatives — we frequently rely on our instincts, resorting to irrational intuition to decide the undecidable. In short, the messy realities of real-world ethical dilemmas consistently expose the shortcomings of any supposedly straightforward normative framework (Hofmeyr 2016: 8).

In the face of this disconcerting reality, Levinas's ethical metaphysics, which is dedicated to coming to grips with the conditions of possibility of ethical action, offers an alternative to the faltering reason of the rational subject faced with ethical dilemmas. For Levinas, ethical action consists in placing the needs of the other person before that of the self. As such, ethical action is an unlikely — perhaps even an "unnatural" occurrence — since we are naturally inclined or ontologically programmed, if you will, to be concerned with ourselves first and foremost — a contention, which at first sight, might seem at odds with an Ubuntu moral framework. Drawing on Spinoza's conception of *conatus essendi*, Levinas contends that by our very being, we are preoccupied with our *own* continued existence, which he describes as the drive to persist in existence and to care for the self. How, then, does this egoist subject committed to perseverance in being become sensitised to the responsibility it bears for the other person? Levinas contends that this happens not through adherence

to some rational normative principle, the rational weighing of better or worse courses of action, or an estimation of the impact of the action but by virtue of an inherent affectedness that literally moves us, so much so that we can no longer remain indifferent to the need or the plight of the other person we feel addressed by. As we shall see, in our analysis of the development of (ethical) subjectivity in Levinas, he theorises the relational self as predicated on radical passivity.

## Levinas's conceptualisation of relationality in terms of radical passivity

Radical passivity can be understood as the profound closeness or proximity of another person. The relational self emerges through an intense emotional preoccupation, or "affective obsession" provoked by encountering the Other, resulting in a paralysing suspension of conscious thought. This creates an uncontrollable rapport or connection with the Other, dissolving the clear distinction between the Self and the Other (Wall 1999: 54).

Levinas seeks to describe the undefinable relationship with the Other (*Autrui*) as something from which I cannot separate myself. More intimate and elusive than any perception or experience, radical passivity as affect arises from the overwhelming closeness of the Other, which captivates and immobilises the subject. This passivity, imposed from outside the self, reflects a lack of intentionality. In this relation, the distinction between the Self and the Other blurs as the identification of the Same with the Other enucleates the Same of sameness resulting in the Self becoming other to itself (see Wahl 1999: 52-55; Levinas 1998: 12). This self-estrangement causes the Other, an apparent external force, to be relocated within the innermost depths of the self. This is the relational structure of ethical subjectivity in Levinas's mature writings: a self in which its egoist ontological nature is in a state of paralysis, where the subject is involuntarily bound to alterity by an external necessity that is paradoxically rooted deep *within* the soul (Levinas 1991: 69/86; 112/143).

Passivity in the radical sense is not merely the opposite of activity but passive even towards itself, as though it succumbs to itself like an external force. Within this passivity lies a hidden power or potential (*potentia*) (Wall 1999: 1).[1] It represents an encounter with an other residing deep within the self that is both stultifying and empowering. Ethical agency, in this context,

1 In Latin *potentia* (power) is derived from the verb *posse*, meaning "to be able" or "can".

follows from a force that incapacitates our self-centred, unethical tendencies. This understanding challenges the common assumption that moral significance requires complete freedom — the unrestrained ability to choose actions without external influence and with full impunity.

## The development of ethical subjectivity in Levinas's works[2]

The initial step in understanding the mystery of the relational self involves tracing the development of Levinas's ethical metaphysics, which reaches its peak in his second magnum opus, *Autrement qu' êtrement au delà de l'essence* (AE)(1974).[3]

Levinas's shift toward ethics, along with his rejection of "the autonomy of subjective freedom" (Levinas 1984: 27), stemmed from his fundamental opposition to revive the transcendental ego (Levinas 1991: 57/73; 127/164). His first magnum opus, *Totalité et infini,* critiques the exaltation of freedom, particularly the individualistic ego-centred freedom. Levinas views freedom with suspicion because it represents "the determination of the other by the same" and "[t]his imperialism of the same is the whole essence of freedom". In contrast, "to welcome the Other" is to "put in question that freedom" (Levinas 1979: 85-87/57-59). For Levinas, ethics begins when the arbitrary freedom of the egoist self is restrained, compelling it to acknowledge its responsibility to others rather than exploiting alterity for its self-serving interests.

In *Autrement qu 'être* Levinas argues that freedom is unrelated to ethics: "[t]he responsibility for the other can not have begun... in my decision". Instead, it arises "from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory'" (Levinas 1991: 10/12). Responsibility, for Levinas, cannot involve a rational deliberation of choices, as such deliberation would render ethics subservient to individual utility and self-interest (Levinas 1991: 136/173-174). Commitment presupposes an intentional act of grasping that inevitably violates (Levinas 1991: 136/174). For Levinas, this goes beyond the susceptiveness of passivity and reintroduces the other-reductive imperialisms of the self.

2 This section draws from Hofmeyr 2007. The citations to Levinas's work provide the publication date for the English translation; page numbers for the English text are followed by page numbers for the French text. Publication details for the French texts are included in the reference list.

3 As we shall see, there is a clear paradigm shift — albeit not a hard break — in Levinas's thinking between *Totalité et infini* (TI)(1961) and *Autrement qu' êtrement au delà de l'essence* (AE) (1974). The thematics that form the focal point of AE is fully developed in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (*De Dieu qui vient à l'iée)* (DVI) (1982a).

Levinas argues that the limitations placed on subjective freedom should not be seen as a deprivation (Levinas 1991: 122/156-157). Instead, the precedence of responsibility over freedom reflects the inherent Goodness of the Good — a necessity where the Good chooses me before I can choose it. This marks my pre-original susceptibility. My radical passivity lies in confronting a responsibility that I cannot fully bear, for something I have not done but cannot deny without renouncing myself. This responsibility is embedded *within* me and imposes a necessity on the otherwise arbitrary nature of my freedom. For Levinas, "real" freedom does not precede but emerges from heteronomous responsibility.[4] It is a liberation from the pre-ethical, self-centred freedom that corrupts the self.

Paradoxically, the works that precede AE place significant emphasis on the necessity of pre-ethical freedom. Levinas's early three works — *De l'existence a l'existant* (EE)(1947), *Le temps et l' autre* (TA)(1948) and *Totalité et infini* (TI)(1961) — centre on the self-transcendence of the self. In these texts, the question of self-transcendence is fundamental and never overshadowed by the question of ethics. The subject's escape [*évasion*] from the oppressive weight of its own existence[5] is ultimately addressed in the course of these works through ethics, specifically in the encounter with the Other. Levinas then maintains that the subject only truly comes into being as ethical subject after the Other has "converted" it, leading it to confront its infinite responsibility for others. However, he also emphasises that the subject's economic, pre-ethical or self-centred existence in the world remains an ethical necessity.

Levinas's perspective on the subject can be divided into two structural phases: (1) the pre-ethical "economic" life of the existent, which is (2) interspersed by moments of radical passivity that makes possible the ethical life of what Levinas terms the "creature". Up until TI, economic self-sufficiency is seen as a prerequisite for ethical generosity. His phenomenological analyses from EE to TI describe the existent's "auto-personification" (Levinas 1979: 147/120). In its "economic" life, the existent takes care of itself and establishes itself as an independent being. Only as self-created, i.e., radically free and self-sufficient, can it be host to the Other — welcoming the Other not with

4 In this regard, Levinas enigmatically writes: "if no one is good voluntarily, no one is enslaved to the Good" (Levinas 1991: 11/13).

5 The question of the subject's escape from itself is dealt with extensively in an early essay, *De l'évasion* (1935/1982c).

empty hands but with something to offer. While in AE Levinas later rejects the notion of any foundational existential base, in TI he still supports the idea of a simultaneous relationship between economic and ethical life.

In his earlier works, prior to AE, Levinas explores subjectivity from two contrasting yet complimentary perspectives. On the one hand, he defines subjectivity through the concept of "enjoyment", where the egoist self embodies the "arbitrary" freedom of economic existence. The self is portrayed as instinctively driven by self-serving desires, depicted as "without ears like a hungry stomach" (Levinas 1979: 134/107). On the other hand, this subject does not fully coincide with itself; rather, it exists as a "diastasis" (Levinas 1978: 18/16, TA, 69/163; Levinas 1979: 238-239/215-216). Even in the realm of enjoyment, it is haunted by a core negativity — the struggle to escape materiality, solitude, and the absurdity of being (*il y a*). In TI, this "nothingness" at the centre of being creates a space within interiority, enabling the subject to anticipate and welcome transcendence. This "frontier" arises not from the revelation of the Other, but, paradoxically, from nothingness (Levinas 1979: 150/124).

In TI, then, the ethical subject embodies two simultaneous conditions: it is both an independent, radically free egoist self and a self capable of "self-critique". As a diastasis — a subject that does not coincide with itself as a result of the negativity at the heart of the existent's existence — the self becomes receptive to alterity, making the call of the Other perceptible even to the "deaf" ego. However, in his later works, Levinas rejects the subject's economic existential foundation, and with it the capacity for "self-critique". This subject's openness to the Other no longer originates from an internal dimension of nothingness but is instead instilled by the Other through the idea of Infinity. This corrective by the later Levinas is a response to the fact that his earlier conception of an inherent nothingness suggests a need that must be satisfied. Hence Other-responsiveness risks reducing alterity to the Same, which would not be ethical. The existent's receptivity that is founded on the idea of Infinity placed in the finite by the Infinite — the pre-original anarchic presence of "the other in the same" — is not a result of radical freedom but stems from the radical passivity of being chosen.

To understand this metaphysical dynamic at work in the relational subject that incapacitates radical freedom while enabling Other-responsiveness, a closer interrogation of the operation of transcendence in Levinas is required.

## Jean Wahl's Influence: transascendence and transdescendence in Levinas[6]

Building on the ideas of his mentor, Jean Wahl, Levinas conceptualises the relational self as involving a dual movement between the self and the Other – described as both trans-*a*scendence and trans-*de*scendence.[7] For Wahl, the immediate connection with the Other occurs in the very intensity of feeling (Levinas 1996: 117). Feeling entails an outward motion toward the Other, characterised as trans-*a*scendence. This is an upward movement in which the self transcends its own being, reaching out toward what is beyond itself. Wahl argues that transcendence is what imbues human life with meaning[8]: "Desire, the source of happiness, of existence above existence, is not a simple lack, a simple emptiness. The appetite for life increases and confirms man's existence" (Levinas 1996: 112). This movement of desire does not, however, culminate in the assimilation of the object of desire. Instead, it remains "without closure" (Levinas 1993: 74), rendering feeling an endless, infinite longing (Levinas 1996: 113-115).

Importantly, the encounter with the Other is not only an outward movement but also has a transformative effect on the subject itself. The desire for infinity, while reaching beyond, simultaneously keeps the subject grounded in its own immanence.[9] In addition to an upward dynamic, then, there is also a "relapsing immanence", which implies a downward motion — a trans-*de*scendence. For Levinas, this descent into the depths of the self represents an ethical

6 I am indebted to Roger Burggraeve who brought the significance of Jean Wahl's influence on Levinas's thinking to my attention. I am thinking of two conference presentations, which he gave in Rome ('A Century with Levinas: Visage et Infini' held on 24-27 May 2006) and Nijmegen ('A Century with Levinas: First Philosophy, Phenomenology and Ethics' held on 21-23 September 2006) respectively (and discussions with him that followed these lectures) on the Levinasian movement from exteriority to the interiority of the Infinite. My own analysis draws heavily upon Burggraeve's research.

7 Levinas explicitly acknowledges Jean Wahl's influence in *Totalité et infini* (see footnote 5, p. 35/5). He has also dedicated two studies to Wahl's thought: '*Jean Wahl et le sentiment*' (1955) and '*Jean Wahl. Sans avoir ni être*' (1976). These two essays are respectively translated as 'Jean Wahl and Feeling' (in Levinas 1996: 110-118) and 'Jean Wahl. Neither Having nor Being' (in Levinas 1993: 67-83); the citations that follow refer to the English translations.

8 "Desire, the source of happiness, of existence above existence, is not a simple lack, a simple emptiness. The appetite for life increases and confirms man's existence" (Levinas 1996: 112).

9 Is not this the immanence which Jean Wahl… called 'the greatest transcendence', asks Levinas, '… that which consists in transcending transcendence, that is relapsing immanence' (Levinas 1944: 38; Levinas 1987: 62-63, footnote 4).

redefinition of subjectivity. In other words, the upward intentionality of feeling, characterised by direct contact with the Other, is inherently connected to a descending movement into the subject itself. Since the "blind, bare contact" with the Other constitutes a primordial feeling described as a "jolt, a shiver, a spasm" (Levinas 1996: 114), this encounter simultaneously brings about a profound transformation within the subject.

## Transascendence, the face, and the idea of infinity

The trans-*a*scendent movement directs the subject on an upward journey toward God,[10] beginning with the face of the other person, which imposes an infinite responsibility. But how does the other person have such a profound impact on me? According to Levinas, the encounter with the Other coincides with the "epiphany of the face" — a manifestation of God. The Other profoundly affects me because their expression introduces the idea of infinity into me, a finite being (see Levinas 1985: 91-92/96-97). The idea of infinity signifies a "height … a transascendence" — a connection to a reality infinitely beyond my own (Levinas 1979: 41/11-12) — and it precedes me entirely as origin or initiative. In other words, this upward movement toward goodness (ultimately God) does not originate within the isolated self. Instead, this trans-*a*scendent motion is driven by exteriority (Levinas 1979: 61/33).

The epiphany imposes a radical passivity that disrupts my self-centred concerns and paradoxically makes it possible for me to embrace my altruistic responsibility (Levinas 1998: 64/106). This is not an act of taking initiative by a rational subject. Radical passivity signifies a kind of paralysis that enables ethical action, brought about by the Other's transformative intervention. In this state, the subject of freedom and agency ceases to exist. Instead, something profound occurs in the subject in the presence of the Other - an ethical redefinition that can be understood as a descent into the depths of the self where the I discovers an anarchic alterity, the Other that is always-already within the self.

10 Ntibagirirwa (2018: 117) contends that scholars generally agree that God might be interpreted as the origin and the meaning of "ntu" (being), the transcendent being.

## Transdescendence and the self-overcoming of the self

Beyond the upward movement of desire for the Other, then, the subject is also drawn inward towards its own interiority, initiating a process of "contraction and interiorisation". This results in two opposing dynamics being united in tension within feeling — a dynamic of immanence that is made possible by transcendence or contact with the Other. Paradoxically, this signifies "transcending transcendence towards immanence" (Levinas 1996: 115-116). Subjectivity exists only insofar as it transcends itself toward what lies beyond itself (Levinas 1993: 76). To achieve this self-overcoming, the very depths of the self must be redefined. This feeling, according to Levinas, is not one of "affective warmth" but rather a traumatic "expulsion" of the egoist self's exclusive self-concern (Levinas 1991: 111/141; Levinas 1998: 83/122). This expulsion is effected by the idea of infinity — introduced into the subject by the epiphany of the face as something external and previously absent —, which leads to the discovery, in the deepest layers of the self, of what has *always already* been present: the Other within the same (Levinas 1998: 65/106). [11] While the transascendent movement may be read as accounting for the Ubuntian subject's openness to the Other, the transdescendent movement explains the inherent relational nature of the subject that is capable of ethical responsiveness and action on account of the enucleation of its self-centred core.

This brings us back to the earlier description of the relational self as being passive toward itself, submitting to itself as if it were an external force. In Levinas's view, ethical agency does not stem from a free, rational choice but rather from an inner force that undermines freedom, which is inherently egotistical. Ethicality is achieved at the cost of the arbitrary freedom that enables both truth and error — the freedom that is central to what it means to be a fallible human.

11 Although never explicitly stated, AE provides ample evidence of the influence of Wahl's idea of trans-descendence on Levinas's thinking. It is here that Levinas fully develops 'this awakening of the *Same* by the *Other*' as a deafening trauma. It is also here that he explains in repetitive waves of enigmatic verse the 'non-synchronizable diachrony' (Levinas 1991: 93/118). I cannot evade this encounter, because it is anachronistic — the debt precedes the loan, the responsibility precedes the guilt (Levinas 1991: 112/143). Something is put in us that was not there before, *while* forcing us to discover in the depths of the self something that precisely has always already been there. It is *an-archical*. Anarchy does not mean disorder as opposed to order. Anarchy troubles being over and beyond these alternatives. Anarchy is persecution. Obsession as persecution designates an inverted consciousness. This inversion of consciousness is 'a passivity beneath all passivity' (Levinas 1991: 101/127).

The relational self, then, can be understood in terms of a dual dynamic between the self and the Other. The outward movement, characterised by the desire for infinity, simultaneously exerts an inward influence on the subject. While this leaves the subject within immanence, it also profoundly redefines the self. Thus, the ethical self is not merely relational, but bi-relational: the outward movement generates an inward transformation that temporarily suspends radical freedom. The subject's bi-relational nature forms the basis of its ethical capacity — I cannot be indifferent to the Other because the Other is within me.

Levinas argues that the detached, cold, heartless attitude — like that of Cain – stems from viewing responsibility solely through the lens of freedom (Levinas 1998: 71/115). He asks why the Other should concern me and suggests that this question only arises if one assumes the ego is inherently self-centred. From this perspective, it seems incomprehensible that something entirely external to me could hold any relevance for me. However, in the "pre-history" of the ego posited for itself a sense of responsibility already exists (Levinas 1991: 117/149). He asserts that the self's foundational condition does not begin with the auto-affection of a sovereign ego that might later show compassion for others. Instead, the responsible ego becomes possible only when it is preoccupied with the Other through a traumatising reorientation that predates self-identification. For Levinas, "the violence of non-freedom" is justified by the Good (Levinas 1991: 123/158-159) — a sacrifice of freedom in favour of responsibility, for the small gestures of goodness that exist in the world, even something as simple as saying, "After you, sir" (Levinas 1991: 117/149).

To return to an Ubuntian application, my argument is that this dual dynamic of transcendence by which the self's inherent egoism is overcome by the discovery of an anarchic alterity within the self, which sensitises it and makes it responsive to its ethical responsibility towards the Other, might be used to throw into relief the dynamics at work in Ubuntu, which, as we shall see, is based on a relational ontology that posits a subject-in-relation-to-others that is inextricably linked to ethics.

## The Other and the other Others

To make the proposed relevance of the dynamics of Levinasian relationality for Ubuntu wholly compelling, an account must be given of how the Levinasian "I am because *you* are" might apply to the Ubuntian "I am because *we* are" given the fact that on the face of things Levinas's sociality is that of the

twosome, whereas Ubuntu is in essence a more inclusive and expansive communitarian moral framework. Ubuntu does not only mean interdependence or interconnectedness, but also the fact that the self is rooted in the community (Ntibagirirwa 2018: 123). How then might we understand how the relation of two — the inherent bi-relationality between the I and the Other — pertain to all the other Others to whom I bear an equal responsibility?

Levinas provides an answer in TI: "Everything that takes place here "between us" concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order, even if I draw back to seek with the interlocutor the complicity of a private relation" (Levinas 1979: 212/187). The self's inherently relationality to the Other, then, by necessity and despite itself, pertains to all the other Others. The other Other, which Levinas terms "the third party", "looks at me in the eyes of the Other" (Levinas 1979: 213/188). Hence, the necessary connection between the apparent exclusivity of ethics and the all-inclusivity of justice: "It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice: the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (Levinas 1979: 213/188) Here Levinas qualifies this openness towards humanity — to the human community as whole — in terms of service. As in Ubuntu, then, service to the community is the condition of possibility of the flourishing of the ethical subject, which for Levinas is subjectivity in the true sense of the word. If "[t]he *thou* is posited in front of a *we*" (TI 213/188), the Levinasian "I am because you are" may legitimately be translated as the Ubuntian "I am because we are".

The community to which Levinas's "we" refers is not limited to like-minded individuals bound together by class, race, ethnicity or common interests — as Ubuntu's conceptualisation of community might be interpreted to mean:

> When taken to be like a genus that unites like individuals the essence of society is lost sight of. There does indeed exist a human race as a biological genus, and the common function men may exercise in the world as a totality permits the applying to them of a common concept. But the human community instituted by language, where the interlocutors remain absolutely separated, does not constitute the unity of genus. It is stated as a kinship of men. That all men are brothers is not explained by their resemblance, nor by a common cause of which they would be the effect (Levinas 1979: 213-214/188-189).

Levinas's "we" might then be read as an expansive and inclusive community or fraternity, which makes his ethical metaphysics applicable across cultures.

## Ubuntu as metaphysical concept and its congruence with Levinas's ethical metaphysics

As noted earlier, Ubuntu is mostly interpreted not as a formal metaphysical or phenomenological account in the technical, systematic sense often found in Western philosophy. A notable exception is Ntibagirirwa (2017), who makes a compelling argument that Ubuntu is a metaphysical concept. He offers this argument to counter what he considers the general tendency among certain scholars to present the ethics of Ubuntu without its philosophical (metaphysical) backing. [12]

Ntibagirirwa (2018: 113) contends that for the Bantu, there is no philosophy apart from ethics. He continues that as a result certain Africans in general, and the Bantu in particular, would agree with Levinas's insistence that "ethics is first philosophy": "my ethical response to my fellow human being is the lens through which all other philosophical questions must be addressed" (2018: 113). He objects, however, arguing that

> one needs to enter in the structure of Bantu languages as they picture the universe to understand that the Bantu ethics is solidly built on ontology in the Aristotelian sense: Ethics is built on metaphysics. Thus we are brought back to the tradition whereby ethical relations to the world and to others is an expression of the structure of being. Contrary to Levinas's thesis, ethics is not prior to ontology and the knowledge of being. Moral philosophy depends on metaphysics as it is concerned with the concrete and the existential conduct of human being (2018: 113-114).

However, in light of his contention that Ubuntu is a metaphysical concept that cannot be divorced from the Bantu conceptualisation of ontology whereby ethical relations to the world and to others are an expression of the structure of being in fact reiterates rather than counters Levinas's insistence that ethics is first philosophy, which he offers as a critique of the totalising and other-reductive tradition of Western ontology that is founded on Aristotelian metaphysics. I contend then that Ubuntu understood as "I am a person through other persons" may more accurately be understood as an ethical metaphysics rather than based on an other-reductive ontology in the Western sense. This is supported by Ntibagirirwa's (2018: 115-116) own contention that for Kagame — who suggested that one can talk of a common philosophy

12 Among these scholars he includes Shutte (1993; 2001) and Metz (2007a; 2007b). He nevertheless acknowledges that important strides in this direction have been made by Ramose (2002; 2003) and to a lesser extent by Mnuaka and Motlhabi (2005).

to all the Bantu — being (*ntu*) is defined, contrary to Aristotle, not *a priori* by considering its essence, but *a posteriori* by considering the way it interacts and is fundamentally interconnected with other beings in the universe.

Citing Kagame (1976: 102), Ntibagirirwa (2018: 116) lists the four categories that constitute the Bantu reality and universe:

1. *Muntu* (bantu in plural) is a being which acts by intelligence — the human being;
2. *Kintu* (bintu in plural) interacts without the use of intelligence (it is characterised by vitality as is the case with animals or plants, or by inertia as is the case with rocks);
3. *Hantu* (same in plural) is the localising being (the being in space and time);
4. *Kuntu* (same in plural) is the moral being; it indicates the way things are or should be.

However, Ramose (1999: 203) argues that "the enumeration [of Bantu categories] is neither complete nor sufficient without the inclusion of Ubuntu". He argues that "Ubuntu is the fifth category of African philosophy. It is a normative category that prescribes and, therefore, should permeate the relationship between muntu, kintu, hantu and kuntu" (1999: 203). However, counters Ntibagirirwa (2018: 118), "bu" of u-bu-ntu is not an entitative being as the other four categories are. As a normative category it describes how things ought to be rather than how or what they are. If we accept Ntibagirirwa's argument that Ubuntu is a metaphysical concept, it might be interpreted as the ontological foundation that postulates an inherent relationality between the four other categories that constitute Bantu reality and universe. However, "*Ubuntu",* according to Ntibagirirwa (2018: 121), "means the humanness or the humanity of the human being", a humanity that is defined in terms of relationality, which confirms the applicability of a Levinasian reading of Ubuntu that would only pertain to the inherent relationality between muntu and bantu.

According to Ntibagirirwa (2018: 122),

> Bantu link ontologically existentiality and ethicality, is and ought, fact (of being human) and value (of being human). If I exist as a human being, I am expected to act or behave morally, so that Ubuntu as a metaphysical concept has a moral landing. Put differently, the only way to be *umuntu,* that is a being with Ubuntu, is through being moral … Ubuntu is therefore humanness or being human which can only be verified in moral acts.

As such, Ubuntu might rightly be interpreted as an ethical metaphysics in the Levinasian sense, although Levinas does not offer a practicable prescriptive moral framework, as Ubuntu might be interpreted to be, but aims to account for the conditions of possible of ethical action. Levinas, then, does not prescribe how we ought to act, but seeks to explains how the "is" of metaphysics might be realised in the "ought" of ethics, which Ntibagirirwa's metaphysical reconceptualisation of Ubuntu fails to do. Herein lies the contribution that this paper seeks to make. A Levinasian reading of Ubuntu, I argue, finds its justification in their common contention that the humanness of the human being can only be verified in moral acts.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Ubuntu's practical emphasis on interdependence and communal flourishing is undergirded by a metaphysical architecture of relational subjectivity much like that found in Levinas's ethical metaphysics. By showing that Levinas's notions of radical passivity and the bi-relational "I am because you are in me" dynamic illuminate Ubuntu's own unspoken assumption — that personhood and moral obligation arise inextricably together — I have bridged a gap between African and Western thought and augmented Ntibagirirwa's argument in favour of a metaphysical foundation for Ubuntu. In doing so, I have argued that what is at stake is nothing less than the coherence of Ubuntu as a living moral philosophy: its authority to prescribe altruism depends on an ontological claim about the very being of the human subject. Integrating Levinasian metaphysical insights therefore does not supplant Ubuntu's richly communal praxis, but rather secures its normative and universal appeal by revealing the deeper conditions that make Ubuntu possible.

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