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Levinasian Ethics in Business

Vincent Blok
Wageningen University, Social Sciences Group,
Wageningen, The Netherlands

Synonyms

[Responsibility as substitution](#); [Responsibility for the other](#); [Thinking-of-the-other](#)

Definition

Emmanuel Levinas' rethinking of ethics in *Totality and Infinity* from 1961 and *Otherwise than Being* from 1974 opens a new perspective on ethics, in which the social relation between moral actors is highlighted. In my face-to-face encounter with another person, I experience the primacy of the other who appeals to me and asks to act and behave ethically. This other is not an object of knowledge but a radical other who is unknowable, and at the same time calls for ethical behavior in response to his or her call.

The Essentials of Levinasian Ethics

For Levinas, the point of departure of ethical behavior is found in the face-to-face encounter with the singularity of another person.

Traditionally, this encounter of another person is characterized by the reduction of his or her otherness to the same and similar. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues: "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being" (Levinas 1969: 43). This middle term is a general principle, rule, or category in light of which different persons appear *as* the same – for instance, as a workforce, a shareholder, or a stakeholder. In such a general principle, their singularity and situatedness is neglected. Moreover, this middle term is traditionally found in oneself: "The relation with the other is here accomplished only through a third term which I find in myself. The ideal of Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism" (Levinas 1969: 44). Because we find this general principle, rule, or category in ourselves, traditional ethics is characterized as ego-logy, in which we see the other person like we see ourselves.

Contrary to this ego-logy of a moral subject in traditional ethics, Levinas develops an ethics which is primarily *responsive* to the demand of the other (he spells the other with the capital letter O – Other – in order to indicate the unbridgeable otherness of this other). And contrary to the focus on moral principles, rules, and universal norms in traditional ethics, Levinas develops an ethics which is primarily responsive to the singularity and situatedness of another person, here and now.

Ethical responsiveness does not consist in following ethical rules and norms according to Levinas, because “from the start, the other affects us despite ourselves” (Levinas 1998: 129). This means that according to Levinas, we are unconditionally and always responsible for the other “to the point of substitution for the other”, i.e., we are responsible for the other despite ourselves (Levinas 1998: 75). This singularity is not primarily accessible by our rational judgments, but by our bodily sensibility and sensation in proximity to the other. Bodily sensation “breaks up every system” (Levinas 1969: 59) of rational and universal principles in favor of the singularity of the other, and enables us to take unconditional responsibility for the other in our performance of ethical behavior.

Four main characteristics of a Levinasian ethics can therefore be discerned (Levinas 1969, 1974):

1. Ethics is not an ego-logy but responsive to the demand of the other.
2. The ethical orientation is not found in universal rules but constituted in the confrontation with the singularity of this other.
3. The other is not accessible through rational judgment but through our bodily sensitivity in proximity to the other, in which we perform ethical behavior in response to the call or need of the other.
4. The face-to-face encounter with the other enables us to take unconditional responsibility for the other.

Levinasian Ethics and Business

The radicality of Levinasian ethics poses not only difficulties for scholars who are interested in the applicability of his ideas in practical questions regarding ethics and justice, but especially for scholars who are interested in the application of his thought in the field of business ethics.

Various scholars have pointed at a fundamental tension between Levinas’ concept of ethics and business. While Levinas rejects the primacy of the moral subject, the focus on universal principles

like codes of ethics and conditional responsibilities toward the other, corporates *presuppose* such an ego-logy and focus on universality. Business is primarily self-interested while Levinas’ ethics is criticizing the economic rationality of self-interest and argues for an interest in the other (Roberts 2001). The singularity of the face of the other provides a moral impulse, but this moral impulse is neglected and instrumentalized in totalizing bureaucracies and governance structures in business life, such as codes of conduct and ethical codes (Bauman 1989). Roberts for instance argues that business is characterized by a “narcissistic preoccupation with the self” (2001: 109) and Bevan and Corvellec argue that “serving its self-interest with profit” is a corporations’ “*raison d’être*” (2007: 212). Because corporations cannot submit themselves to the other, a Levinasian business ethics is impossible according to these authors.

On the contrary, corporations systematize and regulate corporate responsibility by the introduction of corporate governance and codes of ethics, in which the singularity of the other is neglected in favor of universal norms and principles. Because corporate governance neglects the singularity of the other, corporate codes of ethics can be seen as an oxymoron from a Levinasian perspective (Bevan and Corvellec 2007). In their book on business ethics, Jones and colleagues provide good reasons for a rejection of corporate codes from a Levinasian perspective. Corporate bureaucracy enforces rule-following and with this releases the individual from his or her responsibility for the other (Jones et al. 2005). Also Bauman argues that bureaucracy creates a “moral distance” (Bauman 1989; cf. Mansell 2008).

The incompatibility between moral impulse and bureaucratic governance structures leads to a dualistic conception of business ethics, with the corporation on the one side and ethics on the other. Based on this dualism, the possibility of a Levinasian business ethics is rejected (Bevan and Corvellec 2007; Roberts 2001). Bevan and Corvellec for instance argue that a code of Levinasian ethics would be a contradiction in its own terms.

Another argument against a Levinasian business ethics is that ethical responsiveness to the singularity of the other presupposes a bodily sensation in proximity to the other and that only human beings are able to achieve such a proximity to the other, contrary to corporates. Only human beings can submit to the other, and because a corporation is not a human, it cannot take over this role as a “corporate” citizen: “Corporations lack the bodily subjectivity that is the precondition of a Levinasian approach to the Other; only humans can act ethically and because corporations are not humans, it is impossible to speak of corporate ethics, and we can only speak of managerial ethics” (Beven and Corvellec 2007: 217).

While a corporate business ethics is impossible from a Levinasian perspective, Beven and Corvellec argue that individual managers in such corporations can take responsibility for the other. Byers and Rhodes (2007) move beyond this role of individual management and extend it to employees. They take the social relation to the other in organizations as point of departure in their research and identify cultural practices in organizations in which the singularity of each member of the organization – not only managers and business leaders but also employees – is respected. Such a notion of individual responsiveness, contrary to corporate responsiveness, does not imply that ethical responsiveness to the call of the other is more easily achieved by individual managers and business leaders. If one thing can be learned from the application of Levinas’ philosophical insights in the field of business ethics, it is why egoism and self-interest is so self-evident in business life (Demond 2007).

Toward a Levinasian Business Ethics

In the discussion of corporate versus individual responsiveness, a strict distinction is made between the corporate level with its bureaucracy of ethical rules and regulations, which is rejected from a Levinasian perspective, and an individual level of leaders, managers, and employees who may develop the sensibility to take care of the other without being able to codify this

responsibility in a system of corporate rules and regulations. Some scholars are hesitant to remove all regulation and to count on the moral impulse at the individual level of business leaders and managers alone. Mansell for instance argues: “To the extent that a person can be held accountable to others for the ethical content of their actions, the need for rational justification can be seen as an indispensable requirement of their ethical disposition, even if it cannot be its foundation. If rationalisation can be seen as an integral part of ethics, then perhaps it is understandable that corporations attempt to codify their responsibilities in a set of principles” (Mansell 2008: 566). Mansell maintains a strict distinction between rule following and responsibility for the other, but argues that rules can be seen as a codification of a moral experience which always remain beyond the rules and cannot be found in these rules (Mansell 2008). According to Mansell, corporate governance is embedded in the moral experience of the other. In this respect, corporate rules and individual managers’ sympathy for the singularity of the other belong together in corporate ethics.

As a consequence, rules and codes should be applied in a flexible way in order to account for the singularity of the other and we should reflect continuously on the applicability of these rules in a given situation (Mansell 2008: 573). This reflexivity is also necessary because rules and regulations are not only expected to lead to ethical but also to self-interested behavior of individual managers (cf. Weaver and Trevino 1999). In order to prevent a purely symbolic use of codes and regulations (Arya and Salk 2006) through an ethics of self-interest, in which not being ethical but being *seen* as ethical is essential (Robert 2001), flexibility of corporate governance and reflection on its applicability is a necessary condition to combine rules and responsiveness according to Mansell, which is at least consistent with Levinas’ ethics. In this way, Mansell can defend the possibility of a Levinasian business ethics.

Another defence of the possibility of a Levinasian business ethics can be found in the rejection of a strict distinction between the corporate level of bureaucratic governance systems and the individual manager or employee level (Ten

Bos and Willmott 2001; van de Ven 2005). According to Ten Bos and Willmott, “bureaucracy may actually accommodate and protect some space for the expression of moral impulses, at least to the extent that it outlaws or inhibits practices (e.g., nepotism) that engender greed or fear” (Ten Bos and Willmott 2001: 789). Van de Ven for instance distinguishes between two types of self-interest of companies – pure egoism which should be rejected from a Levinasian perspective and a type of self-interest that acknowledges its dependency on the other and is presupposed in taking responsibility for the other: “. . . the constructive integration of a CSR strategy requires that it is compatible with the reproduction (self-interest) of the system. If the management of a firm does not acknowledge this, it could risk the continuity of the firm” (van de Ven 2005). In other words, only if the continuity of the firm is served, it can take corporate social responsibility for the other. When actors were completely open and responsive to the demands of the other without any self-referentiality or ego-logy, there would not be a “self” at all which is open to these demands of the other. As Blok (2014) argues, our efforts to act and behave responsive to the demand of the other will remain imperfect, because of the self-referentiality of the self (self-interest), which is a necessary condition of our responsiveness as well (cf. Aasland 2007). Because of this egoism or self-referentiality as a necessary condition of our responsiveness to the other, all our efforts to be responsive to the demand of the other remain *imperfect*. And it is the imperfection of our effort which can be taken as a call to substitute for the other, i.e., take responsibility for the other despite our own interests in business. According to authors like van de Ven, the self-interest of actors is inescapable and a condition for the responsibility for the other and in this respect, Levinas’ ethics can make business leaders sensible for the ethical in the business context.

Notwithstanding the ambition to transcend the dualism between corporate rules and principles on the one hand and the moral impulse on the other, van de Ven, like Mansell, argues that this moral experience lies beyond rules and regulations. In other words, their ambition to transcend this strict

distinction is not achieved while the precise relation between the two is not subject of reflection.

Other philosophers tried to reconceptualize the notion of corporate rules and regulations to solve this dualism in favor of a Levinasian business ethics. Mollie Painter-Morland for instance rehabilitates the notion of corporate codes of ethics by focussing on the relational aspects of codes and by stressing that codes of ethics should be part of an ongoing questioning of decisions and practices, i.e., a questioning of its content, its applicability, and its limitations within the business context. With this, the incompleteness and imperfection of corporate codes is stressed (Painter-Morland 2010). Inspired by Levinas, Vincent Blok developed a performative concept of ethical oaths (Blok 2013) and corporate codes (Blok 2017) in which the incompatibility between moral impulse and corporate rules and regulations are bridged. Four characteristics of a Levinasian concept of business ethics can be distinguished, based on his work:

1. Business ethics concerns corporate actor’s self-regulation to act ethically in response to the call of the other.
2. Self-regulation is constituted by firms’ responsiveness to the call of the other and by their self-interest or egoism (self-referentiality).
3. Because of the structural possibility that firms serve their own interests, instead of being responsive to the call of the other, the possibility of the imperfection of firms’ responsiveness should be acknowledged in business ethics.
4. Because of the structural possibility of the imperfection of firms’ responsiveness to the call of the other, the call should be taken as a call to substitute for the other, despite firm’s tendency to serve their own interests (Blok 2013, 2017).

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