

# LÉVINAS AS A PERSPECTIVE: ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITY – SYMMETRIC OR ASYMMETRIC RELATIONS?

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## Abstract

*Professional relations in the field of pedagogy, education and care are often described as symmetric or asymmetric having in mind that the professional has an advantage of being the professional. Using the perspective from the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas this is not just a matter of course that the professional has the advantage.*

*In Denmark we have a tradition of referring to the Danish philosopher K.E.Løgstrup or the German philosopher Martin Buber when investigating the professional encounter or meeting and often stating the asymmetry without any further considerations... Løgstrup makes us aware that we cannot refuse to take the responsibility in a situation with an ethical demand and these situations occur to us without any intention. We end up having parts of the other person's life in our hands, he says. And it is up to us, whether this life will succeed or not. Buber, known as the "Philosopher of the meeting" tells us that we are not to make the other person an "it" and thus objectify him. We are responsible and stand at both ends of the professional relation, he says.*

*With Lévinas you get more perspectives on these ethical questions.*

*In this paper I am going to introduce some of Lévinas thinking and use them together with authentic examples. The examples are all from professional work with people with very severe acquired brain damages. They all live in a protected setting, constantly and permanently depending on different kinds of support. The professionals can be rooted in care or pedagogy or both, and the examples are to be seen in a Danish context.*

*On this background I will reflect on a modern understanding of being a professional in areas of care, pedagogy and education. Even if Lévinas seems utopian, his work can contribute to new reflections related to tendencies in a modern world – tendencies related to power, to individualization, and to a lack of presence.*

**Keywords:** applied ethics, symmetry and asymmetry, power, professionals, responsibility, hostage, education

## What do we know about Lévinas?

The French-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1906 – 1995) is well known for his work with ethics. Ethics as an ontology is a core value in his work, and reflections related to terms as the meeting or encounter with otherness make Lévinas a central person when it comes to discussing interpersonal professional work. He expressed once his philosophy in general in 2 words in French "**Après vous**" – it means "after you", and in the everyday term you hear politeness, but in Lévinas' understanding it is an ethical demand meaning that the Other always is the more important person in the relationship (Lévinas:1996:62).

Lévinas was born in Lithuania, but studied in France and in Germany. He was inspired from famous philosophers working with phenomenology as Husserl and Heidegger, and later with Sartre and Derrida. He became a French citizen already in 1930. During the 2.World War he was imprisoned – and he was Jewish.

### Why do I introduce to Lévinas' thinking?

In Denmark we have a tradition of referring either to the Danish philosopher K.E.Løgstrup and his ethical demand or to the German Martin Buber, when we want to stress the ethics in the professional encounter. These situations could involve professionals working with care, pedagogy, social work, teaching, therapists or others.

Reading German literature on e.g. care and about pedagogical work with people with disabilities and impairments we very often read about Lévinas and his ethical concept (e.g. Dederich: 2001, 2011, and 2013). Often Lévinas' ethical standards seem quite demanding, and still his work seems to be used as a kind of ideal. Lévinas is very often quoted in work related to care and pedagogy. This is not the case in Denmark - so far. Perhaps because it seems too demanding? Or did we move away from the idealism making these types of professional work a mere tool for earning a salary? Or perhaps because only little of Lévinas' work is translated into Danish?

But why do I then want to introduce Lévinas' thoughts and theories? And in exactly the fields where they can seem idealistic and demanding? I will explain this further but for now just say that you might be inspired to new perspectives on ethics and professionalism by Lévinas, and especially he might challenge an old "truth" that the professional relation is asymmetric in favor of the professional person. Power relations might be seen from many perspectives.

### A few important terms and concepts

**In the face of the other** you will read a need for help and support and the term **face** should not be understood too literally. You see the Other and not only the concrete Other, but a **track** mirroring all others with e.g. the same impairment or disability. The face is a kind of generalized cultural print. An observation of the face will call for a responsibility that you cannot turn down. You cannot turn your back on this responsibility as a professional and you cannot do it as a human being in general. You **must** deal with it. It is a kind of test, and you are not always fully conscious about it, but in this testing your own ethical being is raised. We are to become a person ourselves in this meeting with the Other (Lévinas:1996a, Taureck:1991)

This could mean **being a hostage**, Lévinas thinks. The ethical demand is strong and you cannot do anything else than helping. As a professional you think you are in a powerful position but perhaps you are not. The question of symmetry and dissymmetry might look different than we think in our everyday understanding. Lévinas stresses that you are not alone in this situation. The immense responsibility and this situation could be unbearable, but we are included in a "community", and Lévinas understands this as a kind of welfare society ( Lévinas:1994.44; Burggraeve: In Pedersen:2006)

In the encounter or meeting with the Other we should not just use our cognitive skills and rational understanding. Sensitivity in touching, listening and observing is very important. We must in a way be patient and not always hurry on in cognitive recognition and intentionality, he says. **Passivity** can be very important. (Lévinas:1992).The meeting is followed by **openness** and a readiness for changing yourself. In this way a traditional concept of intentionality is not enough, and Lévinas refers to intentionality in his own way depending very much on our very being and on our senses (ibid)

### Examples

Following a setting with people suffering from severe brain damages acquired late in life and often together with other impairments has given me great opportunities to observe meetings/encounters between these citizens and professionals and ask professionals about their experiences. My work build on a phenomenological approach with observations and different types of interviews. Besides Lévinas, my work is inspired from other phenomenological and ethical theories, e.g. Axel Honneth.

1. A professional (social educator **and** nurse) says: I feel better here at work, because I actually bring them home (meaning she is worried about the citizens when she is in her private home)...when I am here I feel we are equal but when I am driving towards home...oh, I really pity her ( one specific woman), what a fate (destiny), and I am not thinking like that while I am here. Then we are equal and we have a dialogue.

Even if one specific woman causes these thoughts, she is kind of symbol or mirror for all the people in this setting.

2. When the professional person is able to read and the person with brain damage has lost some competencies, you might find it obvious that the professional (Elsa) is the powerful part in the asymmetric situation. But perhaps it is not that obvious according to Lévinas.

One fine morning I observe the social educator and a man, Peter, with severe brain damage, sitting cozily next to each other. She reads the newspaper aloud to him, and he sits relaxed with a smile in his face. Elsa finds small pieces of news and read them out aloud. He smiles and makes small comments, and you can see that he is observant and follows her. Then Elsa asks if she should read a certain part, and Peter says that he probably would not have chosen that part. She reads anyway. Soon after they finish the reading, and Peter says thank you, it has been nice - but he had never read the newspaper that thoroughly, he adds.

Peter's attitude and tone of voice has a humoristic and friendly touch, but Elsa experience that she did not "read" Peter well enough and in a way she lost face. In this sense Lévinas would say that the relation and the symmetry are different than we intuitively would say.

3. Our senses are important in the encounter. We can learn from all of them: eyes, ears, our skin, following the breath of the Other etc. And we must use our imagination and creativity to interpretate what we experience this way. Every situation is new and this is important to have in mind as a professional.

A social educator; Elsa, sits next to a woman, Lene, in a wheel chair – without any verbal language – and with very low arousal and almost without mobility in her hands. This woman indicates interest in a certain activity, and I observe the social educator holding Lenes hand, touching her arm and imitating the movements trying to decorate a small box with a color, chosen by Lene. I am so close that I can hear Lenes breathing. After this small activity lasting perhaps 8 minutes I ask Elsa how she could know what Lene wanted. It had been difficult, Elsa said, and she also found it difficult to explain it to me.

I see Elsa's openness, her extreme presence and her open senses in listening, touching and following the tiniest movements as crucial.

When Lévinas is interested in language it is not language as a way of sharing and getting information, but language carries a kind of track of our being and saying ( Lévinas:1992). In this context – as in many others - Lévinas uses terms and words in a very unique way. Saying is more important than what is actually being said (Lévinas: 1994). You might say this is a parallel to the face. Language mirrors something more than just information. Here you might find a link to the person, Lene, that existed **before** the brain damage.

To be able to participate and be involved as in example 3, Lévinas has another term: **ethical communicative event**, and it is almost like a not-palpable touch.

4. A woman, Dorte, with brain damage is dependent on the professional in doing her bathroom rituals. The professional, Elsa, has to be ready for the next task outside the room at a certain time and she asks Dorte to hurry up. Dorte starts crying and as a result she has a bad start of the day and she asks the professional to leave. Dorte is sad, and Elsa is sad and feels so bad about the situation, that she later on discusses this with the manager, expressing critique about the structure and about how her work as a professional is organized.

### Discussion of findings/examples

I now want to go a bit deeper into a discussion of some of Lévinas' terms using these examples: To be a hostage and having a very special responsibility might sound very incompatible to a modern concept of autonomy. We kind of celebrate autonomy in our modern world, and if you as a professional can be seen as and experience being a hostage, you might consider this as an offense to your personal and professional autonomy. Are you supposed to take this responsibility just because you have a job as caregiver or social educator and how do you deal with this?

Lévinas says that you are not alone in carrying this responsibility. Our welfare system and the state helps you. Here it is important to be able to discuss and share these experiences among your colleagues – and having a culture of sharing knowledge and experiences in the work place Lévinas also says that autonomy contains an opening towards the Other and his Otherness, and autonomy should not be misunderstood as individuality ( Taureck:199: 87 - 109).

Is the social educator Elsa a kind of hostage when she has this feeling of mentally bringing the specific woman in example 1 back home ? And in example 2: how is the distribution of symmetry or asymmetry? If Elsa loses face and Peter actually is aware of the roles in the relation, you might question the traditional way of seeing the situation and the roles as symmetric in Elsa's favor.

Observing Elsa in example 3 tells me how much senses are used when we lack the verbal language. Lévinas also says that we are to use imagination and creativity in the relation because it is important to see every situation as a new, and even if you work with the same person for years you must be able to see that person as new every time you enter the relation ( Lévinas:2002). Otherwise you run a risk of acting on stereotypes and categories. This would be against Lévinas' ideas.

This openness and creativity together with an ability to cope with the process are key values for Lévinas. He argues against "Totality and Infinity" as one of his most famous books are entitled. In the encounter with the other you are not supposed to think of categories and certain labels as e.g. diagnosis. It is very important not to aim at "sameness" (Lévinas:1994a). This would according to Lévinas be part of totality, and in all parts of life he would argue against totality – especially in a political sense ( Lévinas: 1996a).

The fact that we see a woman as the professional might not be totally random. Lévinas actually would say that women might have some special values. Female virtues, he says, might stress homeliness, presence, openness, hospitality and a kind of passivity more, and through these values Lévinas' concept of intentionality is more likely to be realized ( Kemp:1992)

Example 3 also tells about another term in Lévinas' vocabulary: the ethical communicative event (1992). Language is important, but language is so much more than just a question of circuits of information. Through language and language understood in a very broad sense you develop a kind of presence and this presence is related to another significant term: **intricate**. Our lives are woven together in a complex way. Sounds, touching, ability to decipher small signals and to be present and to present vigilance in the situation – all small elements are important.

Example 4 reflects what happens when we start to implement standards – against the ideas from Totality and infinity. Justice for Lévinas means difference. You must work with individual solutions respecting the Otherness of the Other. If you want to have complete justice you will obtain the opposite – injustice, and you will lose presence and openness (Taureck:1991; Lévinas:1994a). Here you also get an idea of Lévinas' critical attitude towards certain tendencies in society in general. Standardization of the bathroom routines hurts both Dorte and the professional, Elsa.

### Further reflections on Lévinas related to teaching, to pedagogy and other professional fields

This brief discussion of authentic examples using some of Lévinas' terms and concepts shows us that ethics is a very important and profound value in Lévinas' thinking. So profound that it is more important than ontology.

To have this attitude towards the other human being is very important, but is it a natural gift to be able to meet Otherness like that? Lévinas himself reflected on teaching and had an idea of openness as something to be developed and trained during a pedagogical process involving an ethical interruption.

Unlike Socrates and his way of asking and thereby bringing forward what the student apparently already knew, Lévinas says that the teacher ( in a broad sense) must have the courage to interrupt and be intruding the other. Socrates would only confirm the same and not bring forward the Otherness, Lévinas says (Holst:2011). In this process Lévinas stresses the question and the questioning. Through questions you open for critique he says, and so bringing the truth nearer ( Lévinas:2009). It also opens to creativity according to Lévinas ( Muhr: 2010).

Thus being a professional teacher or educator involves ethics and responsibility. According to Lévinas you serve as a role model, and you must represent values as openness, hospitality and openness to a critique of rationality as the only way of getting closer to truth. Taking under one you might say that Lévinas has high standards and demands for the professional (Frandsen:2011; Lévinas: 2009).

### **Inspiration to a discussion of the question on understanding what it is like to be a professional?**

Following the ideas from Lévinas it is quite easy to see how he stresses an open attitude, ethics and readiness for letting the Other and Otherness have precedence. If we have Lévinas' values and perspectives in mind when looking into the educational system today, you will soon see some discrepancy. Our educations in Denmark are strongly build upon measurable outputs. Until recently we had values as the German **Bildung** and personal development as essential parts of many curricula and official educational orders. If you look into educations for professional bachelors aiming at the work with people and in the field of care, treatment and pedagogy, teaching this has over the last few years changed drastically. In more aspects this can be seen as working against Lévinas' ideas:

- a) Terms of personal development and Bildung regarding professional bachelor students disappeared from official educational orders
- b) Educations are built of short modules and you have to pass every module before going on to the next.
- c) The government tries to motivate students to begin studying at a young age.
- d) These young students are almost pushed to finish in a hurry.
- e) They are brought up with a lot of IT and different social media not being used to physical bodily presence and touching. Getting used to second-hand experiences with IT change your way of experiencing, and you might be alienated to using your senses.
- f) You see a kind of physical shyness and modesty and fear of contact. To take care of others' toilette and intimate hygiene seems odd and abhorrent for some of our students.
- g) A modern society makes tributes to individuality and autonomy. This might conflict with this attitude towards the Other stressing responsibility and respect for Otherness and saying that the Other and not you is the main person here.
- h) We see a tendency to let daily routines be managed based on the ideas from New Public Management letting systems overrule the relation and the meeting.
- i) Demands on documentation and systems almost functioning as "scripts" present a risk of developing a kind of mental laziness. You can say you have done your duty and lean back not regarding your responsibility and the respect for Otherness ( Eide:2012)

Being and becoming a professional in this field means openness and a readiness to change. Meeting Otherness in e.g. a person with disabilities might actually teach you something ( Kittay:2004). We could learn not just to see us as able, but just able for now. At some point of our lives we all will be not-able, the American philosopher Kittay says. And remembering this might affect our attitude and openness.

The Dutch Gert Biesta works with education, and he is often referring to Lévinas, also when he says that we are stressing facts too much. We cannot just teach for output, he says. He uses a quote from the author Yeats, that teaching more should be seen as lighting a fire.

The fire is necessary as part a burning commitment in the work and also when learning something and working with your personality and your attitude. It is also necessary when learning hard core facts, and I think we need to find a new balance between these dimensions.

### Conclusive remarks

I think that Lévinas' inspiration can make us question the apparent truism that the professional and the person in her "custody" are related in a way where asymmetry is always in favor of the professional. The relation might be symmetric in the opposite direction.

I started with some remarks on the very ideal content in Lévinas' work. I still think it is very demanding to be a professional if you follow his ideas of responsibility and of being a hostage. On one hand we must find another balance so we do not meet too much "burn-out" among the professionals if they do not cope with their commitment in a balanced way. Some might say that working according to Lévinas' ideas would be more like a calling? On the other hand questioning the apparent truism also might affect our attitude in other ways.

Finally I think Lévinas' work is refreshing in questioning and criticism of e.g. totality, infinity and cognition. He questions the way power is being put into practice – it happens in many levels and often behind our backs and unconsciously. And this is why his work deserves to be presented - also in a Danish context.

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