

The Irreducible Other: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Under Levinas's Alterity

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Abstract

Considering Emmanuel Levinas's ethical conception of alterity (l'Autre) and the theory of temporality in his *Time and the Other*, this article shall proffer a interpretation of the philosophical "lightness" and "weight" in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The notion of lightness ultimately signifies the suspension and the evasion of ethical responsibility, whereas the weight corresponds to Levinas's "time comes into being with the Other". From this, the ethical antithesis between lightness and weight is revealed to us. A responsibility is thus revealed in it, and from it, we can see a relation between self and Other is constituted.

Keywords

Emmanuel Levinas; Milan Kundera; *Time and the Other*; *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; the Other; ethics of alterity.

1. Contingency and the Openness of Time: Levinas's Time and Kundera's Fate Writing

Emmanuel Levinas, in *Time and the Other*, has a very different understanding of time compared to the traditional metaphysical temporality conception. Time usually has been regarded as a continuous yet linear process, like a system which can be totalized, or a sequence viewed from the past through the present toward the future. Considering this, time remains subordinated to the control of the subject and has been constructed with the shape of the self. And there is an argument in Levinas's conception of time: a violence of sameness—the Other is compressed into a temporal framework of subject. Thereby it has been deprived of its absolute alterity. For this, he, Levinas, seeks to set time free from the framework of ontology. What's more he also suggests that people are ought to reconsider it with the ethical relation of the Other, emphasizing the rupture of time and its resistance to totalization.

At the beginning of *Time and the Other*, Levinas proposes that "time is not the accomplishment of an isolated and solitary subject, but rather the very relationship between the subject and the Other." [1] The encounter between the subject and the Other interrupts the sameness of the self, and the openness of subjective time arises from this encounter. Therefore, the future is not merely the extension of the subject's self existence in time. And it emerges as a fissure within subjective temporality brought about by the influence of the Other, originating from the ethical call of alterity. It is precisely the appearance of the Other that interrupts the closed temporality of the self and compels the subject to face the true future.

Levinas's time ultimately refers to responsibility for the Other. The meaning of time lies in how the subject becomes "open" by the intervention of the Other, shouldering the responsibility for the Other. It is that an ethical call originating from the Other. Levinas overturns the traditional understanding of time as either a linear or an inner subject experience, and fundamentally changes the presupposition that "time belongs to the subject." On this ground, contingency is not only the manifestation of the uncertain fate but also the expression of the openness of time. Fortunately, Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* precisely provides a narrative

example of this time conception. The novel begins with the hypothesis of “eternal recurrence,” while through the transformations of the characters’ destinies in concrete events, the dominance of contingency emerges. Through this, the Nietzsche’s existence is suspended as an empty assumption. The trajectories of the characters’ lives do not follow a determined chain of causality; rather, they are constantly driven forward by accidental events. The encounter between Tomas and Tereza is a direct manifestation of such contingency. In the novel, contingency dissolves the necessity in traditional narratives of fate, implying the essence of human existence is a groundless “lightness.” It is the contingency that allows time its heterogeneity. Tomas’s “present” (*présent*) is interrupted by the arrival of the Other (Tereza), leading him to move beyond himself and enter into an asymmetrical relation with the Other.

Tereza’s accidental arrival interrupts the continuity of Tomas’s linear self-temporality, endowing him with the realization about her intervention. So his own temporality is no longer closed upon itself, but shaped by the Other. And his life undergoes a transformation from “lightness” toward “weight”. In other word, the responsibility for the Other comes into his mind. According to Levinas’s theory of time, such an encounter marks a moment: the subject’s temporality opens itself toward the Other. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas proposes time as an “instant of alterity.” This proposal indeed breaks through the traditional presupposition of temporal continuity, which regards time always maintains a linear, from the past through the present toward the future, structure. Levinas advances another understanding of time : the “present” is constituted by a series of independent and ruptured “instants.” The instant is the event, through which, the existent emerges contingently from existence. Such an emergence interrupts the continuity of the sequence of events. It is not connected with the past or the future; rather, it emerges from within them through a rupture. The emergence of the instant from existence constitutes the arrival of subjectivity, namely, “hypostasis” (*hypostase*).[2] Hypostasis occurs in this moment of rupture, in which the subject is summoned and can no longer return to its previous state of being-in-itself, but is compelled to confront its own existential situation. Levinas points out “there is not only the existent’s mastery over existence, but also the weight of existence upon the existent.” [3] Each instant is both a confirmation of the existence of the existent and an opportunity through which the subject discovers its own existence within time.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera presents a similar conception of existence through the manifestation of contingent “instants.” The self of each individual and each mode of existence are not determined by his or her past. Actually, they are confirmed within a series of accidental “instants.” The novel emphasizes that contingency shapes individual destiny, and this uncertainty is also reflected in the decisive role played by numerous “moments” within the narrative. For instance, after Tereza falls asleep on the sofa, Tomas stands by the window and repeats silently to himself: *einmal ist keinmal* —that which happens only once does not count. Yet at the moment when he entertains this thought, the accidental event that occurred only once has already transformed itself into an unavoidable reality. As an Other encountered within his horizon, Tereza has entered his field of vision. Everything has become irreversible. Tomas bears responsibility for her, and this responsibility itself becomes the turning point, so he or his life moves from “lightness” toward “weight.”

Then, Tomas’s at last decided to follow Tereza back to rural life. This decision is not a logical continuation naturally derived from his historical actions, but an very independent existential instant. After the funeral, Tomas suddenly suffers a brief stomach spasm, and Tereza takes this opportunity to ask him to move to the countryside. Later, she deeply regrets this act: “She had taken advantage of the moment when his stomach was hurting and tricked him into swearing that he would go and live with her in the country! She was really cunning!” [4] Tereza regards her action as a kind of calculation, yet she fails to recognize that, within this instant, Tomas is

also compelled to confront himself honestly and to face the transformation of his own mode of existence brought about by the instant.

2. “Lightness” and “Weight”: Existential Choice and the Ethical Call of Responsibility

In Levinas’s opinion, ethics of responsibility is fundamentally concerned with the subject being responsible for the Other.[5] Traditional philosophy generally conceives the subject as an autonomous and self-sufficient being, one that places itself at the center of the world. He comprehends reality through reason and confers meaning upon it. But in Levinas’s view, this kind of self-centered conception of subjectivity neglects the ethical relation between the self and the Other. So ultimately, it leads to the subject’s unconditional appropriation and domination of the world. And He emphasizes that the passivity of the subject, which should be observed within the ethical relation, signifies that it is no longer the sovereign of the real world. It just a being continually summoned and demanded by the Other. Genuine subjectivity is established neither through information of the world nor self-possession, but the encounter with the Other as well as shouldering responsibility. What Levinas proposes is just a decentered subject: a subject that no longer regards itself as the center of the world, but is continuously constituted through its ethical responsibility for the Other. [6]

When the subject confronts the face (*le visage*) of the Other, it is immediately placed under an ethical demand, which he can not shun. At that very moment, the closed structure of the self is destroyed by the Other. Thus the subject is compelled to open itself toward the Other, as a self-for-the-Other: a being defined through responsibility. As Levinas writes: “The face that welcomes me thus leads me from phenomenon to being in another sense. In discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and the urgency of this response—the immediate present—summons me to responsibility (*responsabilité*); as one capable of responding (*responsable*), I am led toward my ultimate reality.” [7]

This ethical summons originates neither in reason nor in social contract, nor even in subject’s choice. It is a transcendent ethical demand. Consequently, genuine subjectivity is not a subjectivity centered upon itself, but one constituted through the determination of the Other.

Responsibility gives existential significance to the side of “weight,” whereas “lightness” reveals a condition which is lack of ethical summons. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera constructs a world of tension through the opposition between lightness and weight. He depicted an existence that continually oscillates between freedom and responsibility. Compared with Tomas’s final choice, Sabina’s way of life embodies an evasion of existential responsibility.

A woman, with an intensely independent consciousness, Sabina, persistently pursues freedom while resisting the constraints of traditional morality. She rejects emotional commitment. Besides, She instinctively distances herself from every relationship that might put weight upon life. The “lightness” she pursues may be regarded as an expression of individual emancipation in modern society, yet it simultaneously conceals an indifference toward, and an evasion of, ethical obligation. Sabina’s top principle is betrayal. She longs for betrayal, despises fidelity, and rejects kitsch. As Kundera writes, “To betray means to break ranks and go off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown.”⁴ Doubt, betrayal, and the pursuit of liberation lead Sabina to move from the oppressive heaviness into the emptiness of lightness. Her betrayal, however, does not constitute the real freedom; rather, it represents a refusal of the ethical summons issued by the Other. Through Sabina’s story, Kundera presents a temporality that never fully arrives: a subject who refuses responsibility can never truly arrive at its own mode of existence.

By contrast, Franz is portrayed as a figure endowed with a profound moral consciousness and a willingness to sacrifice himself. Standing as Sabina's counterpart, he has "weight," as an unwavering pursuit of meaning, ideals, and greatness. Yet this pursuit ultimately makes him to go toward another form of emptiness. He longs to participate in significant historical events, binds his personal value to the course of history, and aspires to contribute to social transformation. These aspirations all testify to his willingness to assume responsibility. In this relationship with Sabina, Franz loves her deeply and consistently seeks to devote himself to her. For him, Sabina is mysterious, rebellious, and filled with a primordial vitality. He elevates her into an idealized figure, imagining her as the goddess who can redeem his existence. His love is founded not upon Sabina herself but upon an idealized image that he has projected onto her. He, Franz, attempts to remain their relationship through love and unwavering fidelity. Such devotion would seem to constitute a faithful commitment to the Other. While Franz's sense of responsibility will not arise from the ethical summons of the Other. It shall arise from a projected ideal of his own making. He never listens to Sabina's own desires indeed; [8] instead, he unconsciously reshapes her according to his own ideas. He speaks passionately with her, imagining that they completely understand one another. But in reality they attach entirely different meanings to concepts such as "fidelity" and "truth."

Although they speak the same language, genuine communication between them never takes place. His sense of responsibility originates less from the call of the Other than from his own moral aspirations. So he does not take responsibility in response to the Other as Other.

3. The Convergence in Kundera's Novelistic Poetics and Levinas's Philosophy

For Levinas, the existence of the subject is interrupted and redefined by contingency. By the arrival of the Other, the subject is alive. [9] Kundera likewise regards contingency as the mode unfolding life. While necessity appears that constrains human existence. At the same time, Levinas maintains the subject becoming an ethical being, only through the intervention of the Other. Kundera refuses to privilege any single protagonist. So as we see, each character possesses an autonomous logic of existence. In this sense, both share a tendency toward decentering the subject.

Actually There is no direct relation of intellectual influence or philosophical inheritance between Levinas and Kundera. They respond to a common predicament of modernity, in different languages and through different forms. How to preserve a place for an irreducible Other within the domain of thought. It is precisely here that Levinas's philosophy and Kundera's narrative converge.

In terms of narrative structure, Kundera deliberately refuses to follow a rigid linear model of narration. So, in his novel, he excels in employing multiple perspectives and parallel narrative lines to unfold the destinies of different characters. This setting allows their stories to intersect and together form a network of ethical relations. His narratives proceed slowly, branching into multiple directions. So it frequently departs from the principal storyline to incorporate digressions and philosophical pauses. They do not exclude the intervention of contingent events, and there is no restriction among the further developments generated by such contingencies. Narrative progression is not the sole purpose of the text. And the novel emphasizes an open structure. In this respect, Kundera's narrative practice echoes Levinas's philosophy. Both of them reject a discourse organized around a single sovereign subject. Through weaving together the intertwined destinies of different characters, Kundera dissolves the centralized logic of linear narration. Then he creates a space, and in it, the voice of the Other may emerge. [10]

The same decentered structure is showed in the characters' relationships. There is a possession in Kundera's novels, but it neither an absolute protagonist nor a perspective consistently centered upon a single individual. Every character becomes an irreducible Other. They enter the horizon of the others and participating in one another's life existence. [11] Each is not only a witness to his or her own destiny, but also an indispensable presence within the lives of others. No one can evade the existence of the Other.

And the relationships in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* exemplify this narrative principle. The encounter of Tomas and Tereza, as well as the entanglement in Sabina and Franz, both of them continually redefine the characters' existence by the intervention of the Other. No individual character is capable of constituting a complete meaning along; each acquires existential "weight" only within the network of relationships, mutually implicated. This decentered configuration in character relations corresponds to Levinas's ethical philosophy: the subject is never self-sufficient but becomes responsible for the Other with their arrival. Through this responsibility, one's own existence acquires significance. [12]

4. Conclusion

Human beings can neither escape the ethical burden of the Other nor shun the lightness arising from the contingency and groundlessness of their own existence. Perhaps it is precisely within this tension that the meaning of existence must continually be forged anew—between infinite responsibility for the Other and fidelity to oneself.

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