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The Concept of Heteronomy in the Ethics of Lévinas and Caputo[1]

Introduction

The aim of this article is to compare and contrast Emmanuel Lévinas and John D. Caputo, two philosophers who have defended the category of heteronomy. Firstly, using the comparative approach will help me understand historical connections between the aforementioned authors. I will demonstrate how the American philosopher is influenced by the ideas presented by the author of *Totality and Infinity* while also criticizing a few of his theses. Secondly, a comparison of the works of the two authors will enable me to look into Caputo's criticism of Lévinas. Additionally, a critical examination of both theorists' works will enable me to explore the boundaries of the heteronymous approach (Do I have an obligation to everyone other than ourselves? How feasible is justice in heteronomy?). As Caputo's *Against Ethics* is his most significant contribution on ethics and the concept of heteronomy, I shall draw on it in this paper The case of Lévinas poses a greater challenge, since his philosophy has undergone some significant modifications in the course of his subsequent writings. Nonetheless, the question on subjectivity, freedom, and autonomy/heteronomy has remained essential. Therefore, I've decided to examine Lévinas' Middle Works, written in the 1950s (including *Totality and Infinity*) as well as his Late Works (such as *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence)*. Finally, my aim is to explore the possibilities of redefining responsibility.

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Lévinas' philosophy has aroused a great deal of interest, and it would be hard to mention all the papers that have been done on the topic. In fact, a lot of them relate to the tension that exists between heteronomy, freedom, and responsibility (Basterra 2015; Davies 2004, 167; Child, Williams, Birch, Boody 2005). The reaction to Caputo is very different. Most analyses of his texts to date have concentrated on theological or hermeneutical difficulties, ignoring crucial ethical aspects (Olthuis 2002; Štofaník 2018; Crockett 2018). There are also few works that juxtapose Caputo and Lévinas, such as a Polish-language article by Patryk Szaj, devoted to the French philosopher's reception in the deconstruction philosophy (Szaj 2015), or a critical article by Seamus Carey (Carey 1997). However, this paper, too, concentrates mostly on Jacques Derrida's critique; Caputo is mentioned here only briefly.

I want to begin my essay by discussing historical roots of the heteronomy category, which also means taking into account the writings of Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment tradition as a whole. Then, in turn, I will discuss the concept of heteronomy in the writings of Lévinas and Caputo. I will examine the legitimacy of the American philosopher's criticism of his predecessor. Within this background, I will attempt to answer the question of my responsibility to the Other.

Kant and the Enlightenment heritage

The understanding of the category of heteronomy remains conditioned by the meaning of the oppositional concept of autonomy. Immanuel Kant gave the most traditional interpretation of this phrase, creating a framework of morality based precisely on the ideal of autonomy (1998B, 4: 433-34). However, it is worth emphasizing that the concept of autonomy has a considerably longer history, dating back to antiquity (as is typical with historical and genealogical study). In studying the history of this concept, Schneewind claims that the processes that occurred in modern philosophy (mainly secularization and the emergence of liberalism) led to the gradual establishment of the ideal of self-government (Schneewind 1998: 5-6). It is worth noting that this is not a philosophical novelty, and one could probably argue for a return to Greek ideals here (Roish 2018: 19-29), but the ideal of self-government has gained increasing ground in political philosophy on the basis of liberalism and the Enlightenment thought. According to Schneewind, this movement reaches a culmination in the ideas of Kant, who was to give a profoundly different conception of autonomy as morality. This category was taken by the German philosopher from the Enlightenment social philosophy and given a completely new meaning (Schneewind 1998: 483).

Kant returns to the concept of autonomy's etymology, which is derived from the Greek *autos*—self—and *nomos*—law. As a result, the most general way to explain autonomy is giving law to oneself. The word is used by the German philosopher in at least two instances. First, on the basis of pure reason and theoretical philosophy, the author refers to the category of autonomy in an epistemological context. *The Critique of Pure Reason* explains how apriori laws shape and influence human experience (1998A, A 133/B 172). Reason provides formal frameworks—laws—that allow us to structure empirical data and do not exist outside the subject.

The second understanding, which is more essential in the context of the current work, defines autonomy in terms of practical reason. All moral duties, according to Kant, are founded on moral law, which is expressed in the formula of the categorical imperative. Reason itself provides us with this imperative. Therefore, in Kantian perspective the subject is the source of law—this time moral law. Thinking in terms of autonomy will thus place the source of moral law on the rational subject's side. As a result, the subject's moral life is cut off from external causes and even internal, non-reason components of the subject's life (including emotions, inclinations, habits, and desires). According to the German philosopher, moral action is an activity performed simply for the purpose of duty. While actions prompted by external reasons or internal impulses may be legal (conform to moral law), they are not truly moral. For Kant, heteronomy meant precisely being influenced by outside causes.

> If we look back upon all previous efforts that have ever been made to discover the principle of morality, we need not wonder now why all of them had to fail. It was seen that the human being is bound to laws by his duty, but it never occurred to them that he is subject *only to laws given by himself but still universal* and that he is bound only to act in conformity with his own will, which, however, in accordance with nature's end is a will giving universal law. For, if one thought of him only as subject to a law (whatever it may be), this law had to carry with it some interest by way of attraction or constraint, since it did not as a law arise from *his* will; in order to conform with the law, his will had instead to be constrained by *something else* to act in a certain way/ . . . I will therefore call this basic principle the principle of the AUTONOMY of the will in contrast with every other, which I accordingly count as HETERONOMY**.** (1998B, 4: 433)

Such an attitude, however, leads to the development of a possibly damaging and counterproductive model of the subject's relationship with the world. This concept is founded on two constructs: (firstly) an alienated, powerful, intelligent subject cut off from the world and even from some aspects of his or her own personality, and (secondly) an external reality

that may even threaten my freedom. One of the difficulties of thinking in terms of freedom and autonomy is the potential of breaking through this alienation and loneliness and establishing an authentic relationship with the Other. This is why, especially during the twentieth century, some philosophers have begun to realize the inescapable entanglement of an individual with the environment and in complex social networks. There have been attempts to rehabilitate the category of heteronomy and to explore the potential of constructing ethics based not on solely subjective factors (reason) or merely external causes (e.g. God's law, another's injunctions), but on the relationship between Me and the Other. In the following section, I shall examine Lévinas' philosophy as one of the most important voices of heteronomous thought.

Philosophy of the Other: Emmanuel Lévinas' concept of moral obligation

If Kant is to be seen as a philosopher of autonomy and immanence, then Emmanuel Lévinas (or at least his Middle Writings) should be positioned in the realm of heteronomy and transcendence. The two authors disagree primarily on the origin of moral obligation. The independent reason, capable of discovering universal moral rule, is the foundation of Kant's ethical philosophy, whereas Lévinas seeks these foundations in the encounter with the face of the Other who transcends me.

Lévinas explores the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy in his article *Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity* [*La philosophie et l'idée de l'Infini*], published in 1957. In this essay the author combines two opposing concepts with different approaches towards the idea of truth. According to the first approach, truth entails the relation between the thinker and the transcendence and exteriority, which is described as "the absolutely other". Embracing this perspective requires the willingness to abandon the safety of the familiar surrounding and to open oneself to transcendence that defies reduction to immanence. The "absolutely other" (*Absolument Autre*) refers to the external other who cannot be domesticated by any form of knowledge or power and Lévinas defines heteronomy as the "philosophy … concerned with the absolutely other." (Lévinas 1987: 47) [*La philosophie s'occuperait de l'absoument Autre, elle serait l'hétéronomie elle-même*.] (Levinas 1957: 241)

In contrast, the second approach prioritizes the sphere of immanence and the spontaneous freedom of the thinker, who seeks to maintain his dominance over the external. In this perspective, the subject is also related to externality, but this relationship takes on a vastly different form. The thinker begins from his own, immanent standpoint and attempts to enclose

the other with familiar and safe categories. The schema of cognition in this approach involves an element of mediation: I can only know the other through some forms of representation, through an abstract entity with an uncertain ontological status. This mediation allows me to grasp exteriority in my internal and well-established categories and mental structures. Consequently, transcendence of the external is reduced to immanence: the other is reduced to the same (*la Même*) (Lévinas 1957: 241-2).

According to Lévinas, the autonomy paradigm has gained dominance in modernity. In his article autonomy is defined as "a stage in which nothing irreducible would limit thought any longer, in which, consequently, thought, non-limited, would be free" (Lévinas 1987: 48) [*un stade où rien d'irréductible ne viendrait plus limiter la pensée et où, par consequent, non limitée, la pensée serait libre*] (Lévinas 1957: 242). The thinker maintains his dominant position but, as a consequence, he becomes closed to the experience of transcendence or the ethical relation with the other. Moreover, the movement of domestication of the external seems dangerous from the ethical perspective, as it leads to the need of control over other beings. The Western civilization, based on the foundations developed in the Modern era, became obsessed with the autonomy and freedom to whom the Other may be seen as a threat.

> Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus. When, in the philosophical life that realizes this freedom, there arises a term foreign to the philosophical life, other—the land that supports us and disappoints our efforts, the sky that elevates us and ignores us, the forces of nature that aid us and kill us, things that encumber us or serve us, men who love us and enslave us—it becomes an obstacle; it has to be surmounted and integrated into this life. But truth is just this victory and this integration. In evidence the violence of the encounter with the non-I is deadened. (Lévinas 1987: 48-9)

> L'autonomie—la philosophie qui tend à assurer la liberté ou l'identité des êtres—suppose que la liberté elle-même est sûre de son droit, se justifie sans recours à rien d'autre, se complaît comme Narcisse, en elle—même. Quand dans la vie philosophique qui réalise cette liberté surgit un terme étranger à cette vie, un terme autre—la terre qui nous sup—porte et qui trompe nos efforts, le ciel qui nous élève et nous ignore les forces de la nature qui nous tuent et nous aident, les choses qui nous encombrent ou qui nous servent, les hommes qui nous aiment et nous asservissent—il fait obstacle. Il faut le surmonter et l'intégrer à cette vie. Or, la vérité est précisément cette victoire et cette integration. La violence de la rencontre avec le non-moi, s'amortit dans l'evidance. (Levinas 1957: 242-3)

Levinas' critique of the concept of autonomy may be better understood by referring to his major work *Totality and Infinity* [*Totalité et Infini*] published in 1961. This writing explores the encounter with the transcendence and its ethical consequences. One of the central themes in this work is the quasi-phenomenological[2] description of the development of one's subjectivity described as responsibility (in contrast to to classical phenomenological theories such as Husserl's transcendental ego or Heideggerian Dasein). The fundamental experience that enables the constitution of the ethical subject is the encounter with the absolute Other (*l'Autrui*). Now let us focus on a brief description of the process of the subjectivity's development. In the standing point, the Same (*le Même*) recognizes him/herself as separated from the external world, and hence differs him/herself from the surrounding. (Lévinas 1971: 119) The need (*le besoin*), which may by understood as the embodied sense of lack (such as hunger) that may be fulfilled by external entities (like food), becomes the crucial experience enabling this recognition. Such a distinction between the internal and the external realm is the fundament of enjoyment—of a free and spontaneous satisfaction of one's needs. Consequently, the external world becomes subordinated to the Same, it becomes the object of his/her actions. Moreover, it is absorbed by the Same, who uses it to fill the lack in him/herself (which may be clearly visible in the example with food that is literally absorbed into the body of the eater) (Lévinas 1971: 119-21).

However, the dominant position of the Same and the value of his/her egoistic attitude are undermined in the encounter with the Other, whom Lévinas describes as the absolute Other (*l'absolutement Autre*)—an element of the external reality that cannot be in any way internalized (Levinas 1971: 28). The Other appears in the experience of the epiphany of the Face (le visage), which represents a unique way of encountering with the Other where the same possibilities of domination, understanding or even perception are abandoned. The Face surpasses the perception and disturbs the intentional structure of consciousness. The Face may by even understood in terms of an anti-phenomenon: it is the part of the Other that can be never reduced to the phenomenon perceived by the subject (Levinas 1971: 43-45). The epiphany of the Face challenges the subject's power, as it forces him/her to confront an element of externality that cannot be possessed or controlled. Lévinas' description is based on the precognitive, affective experience that reveals how the encounter with the face of the Other brings the responsibility to the Same as well as provides the Same with the possibility of an ethical relation.

[2] I am employing the phrase "quasi-phenomenological" to characterize Lévinas' thought, since the author described an experience that cannot be captured by reference to the concept of "phenomenon."

The Face does not appear—it calls upon us to assume the responsibility for the Other. His/her face brings the most primary "imperative" expressed in the commandment "thou shall not kill" [*tu ne commettras pas de meurtre*] (Lévinas 1971: 217).

The subjectivity of the Same is constituted as a responsibility, which is understood in terms of communication: as an inalienable call to respond to the imperative expressed in the epiphany of the Face. I am not able to transfer this responsibility to anyone else or ignore it—it is always my responsibility towards the Other standing before me. In other words, being Oneself primarily means the inability to avoid one's responsibility. That is why responsibility becomes the most curtailed structure of the self for Lévinas (1971: 274).

It is worth emphasizing that according to Lévinas the relationship between the Same and the Other is asymmetrical (Lévinas 1971: 39). The philosopher claims that while I am obliged to respond to the call of the Face in the ethical relationship, the Other is not necessarily obliged towards me. Due to the impossibility of possessing knowledge about the absolute Other with whom I am in the ethical relation, I cannot ascertain his/her duties. I own everything to the Other and I cannot demand anything in return. The absolute, transcendental Other captured in the precognitive encounter with the Face prevents us from engaging in comparative analysis since that would require the use of our cognitive and intellectual capacities. According to Lévinas, any attempt of thematizing the Other excludes the real ethical relationship, which he describes as proximity.

The concept of heteronomy in Totality and Infinity is once again explored in the context of the relation between truth, freedom and the Other. Lévinas argues that the Western, Enlightenment philosophy (from thinkers like Spinoza or Hegel) has given priority to impersonal reason that has been identified with the source of freedom. The ideal of self-knowledge has become central for metaphysics, serving as a foundation of knowledge and truth. The prevailing model of truth-seeking involved examining objects through impersonal categories such as ideas, conceptual language, themes or categories. All of those are created by an autonomous mind of the subject attempting to grasp externality through neutral notions. This approach not only reduces transcendent entities to immanent concepts of reason, but it also diminishes the singular Other to a mere exemplification of the general thesis or universal rule derived from reason. According to Lévinas, the willingness to reduce transcendence to immanence is the root of violence. Therefore, the philosopher seeks a different kind of knowledge—one that would be more heteronymous.

> Philosophy itself is identified with the substitution of ideas for persons, the theme for the interlocutor, the interiority of the logical relation for the exteriority of interpellation. Existences are reduced to the neutral state of idea, Being, the concept. It was to escape the arbitrariness of freedom, its disappearance into the Neutral, that we have approached the I as atheist and created—free but capable of tracing back beneath its condition—before the Other, who does not deliver himself in the "thematization" or "conceptualization" of the Other. . . . To posit knowledge as the very *existing* of the creature, as a tracing back beyond the condition to the other that founds, is to separate oneself from a whole philosophical tradition that sought the foundation of the self, outside of heteronymous opinion. We think that existence *for itself* is not the ultimate of knowing, but rather the putting back into question of the self, the turning back to what is prior to oneself, in the presence of the Other. The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy does not clash with freedom but invest it. The shame for oneself, the presence of and desire for the other are not the negation of knowing: knowing is their very articulation. The essence of reason consists not in securing for man a foundation and powers, but in calling him in question and in inviting him to justice. (Lévinas 1979 : 88)

> La philosophie elle-même s'identifie avec la substitution d'idées aux personnes, du thème à l'interlocuteur, de l'intériorité du rapport logique à l'extériorité de l'interpellation. Les étant's se ramènent au Neutre de l'idée, de l'être, du concept. C'est pour échapper à l'arbitraire de la liberté, à sa disparition dans le Neutre, que nous avons abordé le moi comme athée et créé libre, mais capable de remonter en deçà de sa condition devant Autrui qui ne se livre pas à la "thématisation" ou à la "conceptualization" d'Autrui. (. . .) Poser le savoir comme *l 'exister* même de la créature, comme remontée, au-delà de la condition, vers l'Autre qui fonde, c'est se séparer de toute une tradition philosophique qui cherchait en soi le fondement de soi, en dehors des opinions hétéronomes . Nous pensons que l'existence *pour soi* n'est pas le dernier sens du savoir, mais la remise en soi, question de soi, le retour vers l'avant soi, en presence d'Autrui. La présence d'Autrui hétéronomie privilégiée ne heurte pas la liberté, mais l'investit. La honte pour soi, la présence et le désir de l'Autre, ne sont pas la negation du savoir: le savoir est leur articulation même. L'essence de la raison ne consiste pas à assurer à l'homme un fondement et des pouvoirs, mais ŕ le mettre en question et à l'inviter à la justice. (Lévinas 1971: 87-8)

That kind of knowledge can be described as welcoming of the Other in proximity (Lévinas 1979: 88), without any mediation or representation. Lévinas' Middle Writings are therefore characterized by a firm belief that our responsibility towards the Other is grounded in the experience of transcendence that surpasses our own self. It is not the autonomous freedom that serves as the foundation for ethics, but rather the absolute

Other, who limits our reasoning. However, as his thinking progressed, Lévinas introduced significant modifications in his Later Works. Here, the philosopher developed different perspective on identity and subjectivity, seeking to establish some kind of tertium quid between the autonomous and heteronymous approach.

In Totality and Infinity the ethical commandment comes from the absolute transcendence[3]. This assertion has faced criticism of various commentators (for example Derrida), whose critique has prompted Lévinas to challenge some of his own theses. In Otherwise than Being [Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence] the relationship with the Other is no longer described in terms of a relation of two separated monads. The encounter of the Other disrupts rigid structures of identity, as the Other always leaves a trace—an irreducible excess within the subject that designates him to the ethical, responsible existence (Lévinas 1974: 13-7). Although the Other is initially external and unknowable, he also becomes –through the trace—the element that establishes my responsible subjectivity. This influences also the theory of authenticity. In his later works Lévinas describes the transition from autonomy to heteronomy. While the ethical call does not originate from the Same (it haunts me from transcendence), the I remains the main surface of obligation. Consequently, I am able to internalize the commandment as my own (autos)—a commandment that is not external, but instead becomes an irreducible component of my subjectivity.

> Obedience precedes any hearing of the command. The possibility of finding, anachronously, the order in the obedience itself, and of receiving the order out of oneself, this reverting of heteronomy into autonomy, is the very way the Infinite passes itself. The metaphor of the inscription of the law in consciousness expresses this in a remarkable way, reconciling autonomy and heteronomy. It does so in an ambivalence, whose diachrony is the signification itself, an ambivalence which, in the present, is an ambiguity. The inscription of the order in the for-the-other of obedience is an anarchic being affected, which slips into me "like a thief" through the outstretched nets of consciousness… . It is the possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows

[3] Naturally, Levinas' religious inspirations can be traced here, primarily related to his grounding in the Judaic tradition. The description of the Face as an idea of infinity and the depiction of the encounter with the Other as an almost mystical encounter with transcendence may evoke associations with religious thinking about the Absolute. Perhaps some parallels with the tradition of apophatic theology could be found here. In this approach, the Absolute transcends human cognitive capacities and cannot be perceived through the framework of human concepts and cognitive categories. Any human idea of God necessarily fails to fully express the actual divinity. This is reminiscent of Levinas' reflection on the unknowability of the Face:in the Face the Other transcends the idea of the other in me.

> from where, that of which I am the author. . . . The trace of infinity is this ambiguity in the subject, in turns beginning and makeshift, a diachronic ambivalence which ethics makes possible. (Lévinas 1998 : 148-9)

> Obéissance précédant toute écoute du commandement. Possibilité de trouver, anachroniquement, l' ordre dans l' obéissance même et de recevoir l' ordre à partir de soi-même—ce retournement de l'hétéronomie en autonomie est la façon même dont l'Infini se passe—et que la métaphore de l'inscription de la loi dans la conscience, exprime d'une manière remarquable, conciliant (en une ambivalence, dont la diachronie est la signification même et qui, dans Ie présent, est ambiguité) l'autonomie et l'hétéronomie. Inscription de l'ordre dans Ie paurl'autre de l'obéissance: affection anarchique qui se glissa en moi «comme un voleur», à travers les filets tendus de la conscience (. . .). Ambivalence qui est l'exception et la subjectivité du sujet, son psychisme même, possibilité de l'inspiration: être auteur de ce qui m'avait été Ii man insu insufflé—avoir reçu, on ne sait d'où, ce dont je suis l'auteur. (. . .) La trace de l'infini est cette ambiguité dans Ie sujet, tour a tour commencement et truchement, ambivalence diachronique que l'éthique rend possible.(Lévinas 1974 : 189)

In his text Lévinas presents two metaphors that can aid in understanding his notion of the trace. Firstly, the author portrays obligation as the thief who slips in into my home, my place, without my awareness. The second metaphor refers to the phenomenon of the voice—the Other orders me (heteronomy) by my own voice and my own mouth (autonomy) (*dans mon dire, me commandant par ma bouche)* (Levinas 1974: 187). Both of those deceptions show also the radicalization of Lévinas' thought that unfolded between publishing *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. The philosopher now places greater emphasis on the subject's passivity, and his understanding of responsibility has become even more extreme. The subject has been described even in terms of a hostage, who is forced to exist not for oneself, but for the sake of the Other (Lévinas, 1974, 14). The sacrifice of one's own life becomes the ethical ideal in Lévinas' later philosophy.

Thus, there appears a question of whether the proposed redefinition of "autonomy" has in fact anything to do with the concept of autonomy itself? Lévinas strongly emphasizes the passivity of the subject, disregarding the role of conscious decision-making or free will in moral responsibility. In *Otherwise than Being* the subject does not actively create the laws that express moral obligation, but instead appears rather to internalize them or (at most) passively accept them. Lévinas' notion of "autonomy" is then almost totally against the ideal of self-government.

Body, Pain, Obligation. Caputo's response

One of the primary concerns of John D. Caputo's work *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constatnt Reference to Deconstruction* is the question of moral obligation. The American philosopher begins with a postmodern critique of codified or systematic ethics, which tries to generate universal principles and norms valid in any circumstances (Caputo 1993: 4-5). One of the most crucial concerns that the philosopher deals with throughout nearly all his work is whether it is possible to preserve the category of obligation without resorting to systematic ethics (Caputo, 1993, 18). Caputo seeks an explanation by conducting a phenomenological and hermeneutic investigation of the experience of being obligated. The chosen method combines a description of the actual experience (the phenomenological aspect) with references to cultural, historical, and linguistic approaches to comprehending and interpreting this concept (the hermeneutic aspect). Cultural stories of obligation, in particular, have an essential role in mediating our experience in general, including our understanding of ethical issues. In his works, Caputo argues in favor of heteronomy by radicalizing and criticizing the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas.

The author returns to the etymology of the category of obligation, which alludes to the issue of binding (ob-ligation: *ligo, ligas, ligare*—to bind) (Caputo 1993: 7). Obligation, for him, is the sense of being tied—an unalienable order to react to the call of the Other. Obligation will thus be understood in communicative terms here: as a response to the Other. Commitment appears in the call of the Other, which cannot be ignored—it comes to me from outside, disturbing my autonomy and constituting a certain restraint on my will. Instead, the category of difference, which is one of the criteria for the appearance of commitment, becomes the main element of Caputo's ethics. In his book, the American philosopher distinguishes two complementary ways of understanding the category of difference.

The first one manifests itself on the basis of heteromorphic thinking, which is associated with Nietzsche's philosophy and the post-Nietzschean trend (Caputo 1993: 57). Heteromorphism is the affirmation of plurality, the embrace of pluralism, and the plurality of meanings. Difference will be regarded here as an element that, from within, bursts every imaginable systemic and identity framework. Philosophers linked with heteromorphism demonstrated how every identity is based on diversity and, as a result, cannot be considered, fixed, or unchanging.

Meanwhile, the heteronomous approach, represented notably by Lévinas, entails loving the Other in its singularity in respect to myself (Caputo 1993: 60). It is a focusing on the difference in the Other as something external

to me, something that is continuously transcending the Self. The Other, whom I will never own entirely, undermines my sense of dominance over the universe and introduces me to a new way of being: responsibility and obligation. It is important to note that heteronomy is not a substitute for heteromorphism, but rather a supplement to it. Caputo postulates love for the transcendent, singular Other (heteronomy), who appears to us in his fluid, ever-differentiating individuality (heteromorphism).

In Caputo's philosophy, moral law is subordinated to the obligation to the Other—the principles we follow must be constantly modified (as shown in heteromorphism) and adapted to the requirements of the current situation and the needs of the singular Other (as postulated by heteronomy). Caputo's approach, like Lévinas', undermines the priority of autonomy in favor of the category of heteronomy. Nonetheless, the American philosopher continues to criticize his predecessor. The main point of criticism is, on the one hand, the quasi-mysticism seen in the author of *Totality and Infinity*, and, on the other, the tendency to hyperbolize. As a result, Caputo will provide a radically distinct description of encounter with the Other. Let us now turn to the analysis of main points of dispute.

One of the most important distinctions between Lévinas and Caputo is the status of the Other. Lévinas describes the relationship with the Other as an encounter with a face that reveals the concept of infinity. As the face exceeds the subject's ability of knowledge and power, embracing the Other in any totalizing scheme becomes impossible. Meanwhile, Caputo describes himself as a philosopher of finitude and opposes Lévinas' idea of meeting the face (Caputo 1993: 19). The encounter with the Other, according to the author of *Against Ethics*, is not a quasi-mystical experience of infinity and absoluteness. On the contrary: Caputo's depiction will emphasize the sensual and affective perception of the Other, which reveals itself in its own weakness, fragility, and vulnerability. For the American philosopher, the other is not an absolute Other—the one whom I am unable to place in any cognitive framework. Caputo will understand that any communication necessitates some type of epistemological and hermeneutic work—simply recognizing the other being as the Other is a form of recognition and interpretation.

> But how can you have an absolute relation to an absolute? Would not the very relation and correlation dissolve the absoluteness? How could anything be cor-related to what is ab-solutely Other, since the absolute absolves itself of all relation and correlation? If something were, properly speaking, absolutely Other, then it would not be a matter of concern for us and we would simply ignore it, being quite oblivious of it. Now ignoring the Other would greatly distress Levinas, since the Other lays unconditional

> claim upon us. But that means that the Other is related to us after all, viz., in a very powerful, unconditionally commanding way. We in turn should acknowledge this relationship by responding to it, by answering it and taking it up, decisively and unequivocally. So in fact the absolutely Other is only relatively absolute, almost absolute, not quite absolute. By the absolutely Other, I would mean what is transcendent, quite transcendent, indeed quite a lot, *ad infinitum,* but not absolutely. "Absolute alterity" *ad literam* . . . is something we never reach. (Caputo 1993: 80-1)

And farther:

> Obligations happens. It is a fact, as it were. For there are no facts, only interpretations. Obligation too is an interpretation, a *hermeneia*. The "as it were" is the "quasi," the transcendental almost, almost a transcendental. The Other is not an absolute, not a transcendental fact, not a fact of a pure reason, but a factial fact that I have constructed in a hermeneutics of facticity that includes a section on the poetics of obligation[4] and that has made its mind up to have a heart. (Caputo 1993: 85)

Thus, the incapacity of controlling the Other is due to his fragmentary identity (his partiality) rather than his absolute status. The subject is constantly capable of reinventing his own identity and modifying his attributes. For Caputo, difference is thus a critical component in considering morality for at least two reasons. Firstly, understanding difference in a heteronomous perspective permits us to feel the individual Other and bear responsibility. Secondly, the difference understood from a heteromorphic standpoint implies that this Other can never be incorporated by totalizing methods due to its inherent unstable identity.

Secondly, Caputo criticizes the hyperbolic nature of Lévinas' texts. In particular, the American author rejects the portrayal of the self-to-Other relationship as asymmetrical. In his opinion, the concept of self-sacrifice is vastly exaggerated and perilously close to martyrdom and self-destruction. The philosopher will seek to equalize intersubjective interactions by analyzing the concept of goodness in terms of a gift. If we consider goodness to be a gift given to the Other, then the logic of giving demands the recipient to respond in some way, such as thankfulness or rejection (Caputo 1993:

[4] In *Against Ethics* Caputo prefers to speak not of ethics, but of the poetics of obligation. First, this is due to his demand to move away from ethics, which he defines properly as systematic ethics—a philosophical discipline that seeks to delineate a universal and enduring system of principles. Secondly, the shift to the side of poetics remains linked to the hermeneutic method of the author, who, when speaking of obligation, uses stories about heroes and heroines that are strongly rooted in European culture. New interpretations and in-depth analyses of these stories are meant to give us a deeper understanding of what the obligation is.

124). As a result, not only am I called upon to answer, but the other person also becomes responsible to me, and he cannot remain silent in my presence.

The rejection of the quasi-mystical, elevated infinite narrative leads to a disagreement with Lévinasian philosophy of the Face. The encounter with the Other, according to Caputo, entails experiencing his suffering flesh and his pain. Caputo refers to the distinction between body and flesh, which has special significance for the phenomenological tradition and is rooted in German idealistic tradition. The term "flesh" describes the body as a physical mass, an organ, and as such, a primary subject of the natural sciences. The flesh is an object of the subject's senses and is primarily characterized by its passivity. But a second layer, the body, which was often elevated in classical phenomenology, is overlaid on top of the flesh. The body is a living, vital, active part of our embodiment. It is the body through which I can perceive reality and actively act in the world. The key point is that Caputo, in his thinking about morality, will give priority to the category of flesh as the condition of the possibility of human suffering.

The encounter with flesh has a strong impact on the individual; the Other's suffering body can elicit a wide range of deep emotional reactions, ranging from sympathy to repulsion and disgust, fear, and even anger. A wounded, torn, disabled, malnourished, weaker, and dirty flesh challenges the dominant aesthetic canons that laud a healthy, strong, athletic, harmonious, and active corporeality. At the same time, the sight of pain reminds us that we are all prone to injury, that we all share a corporeal and thus vulnerable condition. This experience of commonality in vulnerability represents for Caputo the essential ideal of compassion, which literally and etymologically means to suffer (passion, from latin *passionem*—suffering) with another person (prefix com-).

However, there is a paradox here. On the one hand, I can sympathize with the Other because I identify myself as equally vulnerable to pain and death, equally fragile and sensitive. On the other hand, however, Caputo defines pain as the limit of cognizable experience. I will never understand another person's pain since it is too personal and intimate to be shared. Any attempt at verbal characterization (while necessary) inevitably falls short of capturing the essence of the object. Thus, the pain of the Other is not only visible, noticeable, and sensual, but also ineffable, incomprehensible, and difficult to put into words.

Nonetheless, it is the suffering flesh, which is both graspable and intangible, that becomes the space in which moral obligation manifests itself. Caputo uses a Christian image of the power of the powerless to demonstrate another bodily paradox. The suffering flesh appears passive, yet it stays active and forceful despite this passivity, since it can call me to respond and impose

a duty on me. Caputo, on the other hand, sees the imperative of responding to the Other as the essence of moral obligation that ties me and constrains my will. When confronted with the vulnerability of the Other, I cannot remain indifferent, because any possible answer is already a type of response. Recognizing our common vulnerability and being open to compassion leads to an awareness of the need to combat all forms of suffering, even if sometimes (like in the biblical stories about God-fools) it requires acting against laws, or even against reason (Caputo 1993: 196-212).

Heteronymous rethoric brought down to earth

The emphasis on heteronomy rather than autonomy brings about as many questions as it answers. Undoubtedly, the departure from the concept of strong, separated subject (rigid and universal, but also insensitive to the uniqueness of a particular situation) seems rather promising. However, it also brings significant challenges concerning freedom and morality. Does surrendering oneself to externality undermines the very foundation of morality—as Kant has suggested? Am I always responsible for every Other? The second question, in particular, appears problematic, as it could imply that I hold responsibility even for the persons who commit acts of violence. Nevertheless, both Lévinas and Caputo provide their readers with certain safeguards that limit our responsibility. In the following section I would like to examine the strategies they employ to soften their ethical radicalism.

According to Lévinas, I own everything to the Other who stands before me, outside of any possible context; however, this encounter should be understood more like an abstraction. In reality, I am never solely engaged in a two-person, direct relationship, as there is always a third party (other people) that "looks at me in the eyes of the Other" [*Le tiers me regarde dans les yeux d'autrui*] (Lévinas 1979: 213; Lévinas 1971: 234). The presence of the third party serves as a boundary for my responsibility towards the Other in both Lévinas' works: *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. Lévinas asserts that I am always already situated within social space, which necessitates trans-individual laws, norms and rules. Thus, it is inevitable to engage our cognitive faculties, such as comparison, recognition, description... Lévinas maintains that the dialog between the self and the individual Other is the fundament of social relations, yet the constant presence of the Third enables the transition from responsibility towards the Other to justice towards others. The concept of justice helps to mitigate the asymmetry between myself and the Other, allowing for the demands to be made upon the person I encounter—as far as we make these demands for the sake of other people.

Caputo introduces three additional "fuses" to this conception. According to the American author, obligation may apply only to singular beings, immersed in particular situations, who are vulnerable and susceptible to suffering. The first reservation aligns with the philosopher's nominalistic approach and appears consistent with Lévinas' thought. Caputo argues that obligation can never refer to the so-called "mytho-super-subject," to abstract ideas capable of generating ideologies. While ideas do possess some agency in shaping our identity and can exert a certain degree of influence, this does not necessarily have negative connotations. However, problems arise when I falsely perceive abstract ideas as subjects calling me to be responsible and to prioritize false "obligations" towards these ideas (such as progress) over my responsibility towards others. Why is this the case? The answer lies in two aforementioned conditions: being embedded in a situation and vulnerability. Mytho-super-subjects cannot fulfill either of these conditions since they lack embodiment and do not share the experiential nature of human existence.

The concept of vulnerable flesh becomes a crucial category in Caputo's ethics. Our obligation is, in the first place, directed towards the Other who, at any given moment, may become a victim of violence or suffering. According to the author, certain social groups, such as outcasts, who have been marginalized and deprived of any systematic assistance, are more susceptible to harm. This does not imply that those who have not experienced discrimination cannot suffer—Caputo only suggests that some individuals are more likely to suffer due to social hierarchy, which also makes it difficult for them to overcome political barriers. The obligation is visible through the experience of the vulnerability of the flesh of the Other. This does not just mean that we are not obliged towards mytho-super subject. The emphasis laid on the experience of suffering means that we are obliged above all towards the victims, and never to those who are perpetrators of violence. The primary responsibility we bear is to actively address and alleviate suffering, often necessitating our resistance against those who cause harm, particularly within the realm of politics.

Conclusion

Autonomous and heteronomous approaches in philosophical tradition seemingly represent two contradictory perspectives on the issue of moral obligation and responsibility. In the first perspective, obligation results from a conscious decision of the moral subject, who voluntarily decides to act in accordance with the moral law. This law is actively constituted by him and discovered through rational inference. Responsibility will be understood here primarily in liberal terms: as the responsibility for one's own actions and

intentions. Meanwhile, in heteronomous view, obligation is supposed to come from outside and it requires the subject to go beyond a closed, subjectivist perspective and open up to the Other, who enters into a relationship with me. Thus, what occurs here is a redefinition of the category of responsibility, which becomes first and foremost a responsibility for the Other. As it was emphasized in the previous section, the notion of heteronomy must be provided with certain safeguards that prevent it from being reduced to an absurd form of complete subordination to another person, no matter what. Paradoxically, it turns out that heteronomy nevertheless requires autonomy: rational thinking, recognizing a given situation and actively constructing a response to that situation, which would be my response. On the other hand, autonomy also cannot function without heteronomy—the Other must remain the ultimate goal of morality. This is already evident in the works of Kant, who, after all, introduced the second formulation of the categorical imperative (1998B, 4:429), which explicitly refers to humanity both in my own person and in any other as the goal of moral action.

Therefore, the heteronomous and the autonomous approach are not mutually exclusive, and it may be more productive to seek middle ground that allows for the intertwining and mutual limitation of these two elements. Lévinas' proposal of Otherwise than Being, although noteworthy, seems inadequate due to its excessive emphasis on passivity and its potentially problematic association with a martyrdom mentality, particularly in its endorsement of self-sacrifice as an ideal. A more compelling concept, in my view, involves the use of the body/flesh duality and the vulnerability to injury as categories. This perspective highlights an affective encounter with the fragility of the Other as the primary experience that compels me to commit myself. Simultaneously, vulnerability implies certain interdependence, wherein not only does the Other become a victim whom I am obligated to assist, but also I recognize and shape my own identity as weak, fragile, and vulnerable. The obligation, despite its unknown (as Caputo insists) origin, becomes evident in the flesh of the Other and in my own body, in our shared condition of fragility and mortality. Furthermore, the affective experience of suffering or witnessing suffering is intrinsically connected to the necessity of consciously acknowledging the situation, interpreting it within the frameworks I have adopted, and deliberately directing my consciousness towards the Other. Without this intentional recognition, it would be impossible to discern the moral obligation and respond ethically to the call emanating from the Other.

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The Concept of Heteronomy in the Ethics of Lévinas and Caputo

Abstract

The aim of this article is to compare and contrast the conception of heteronomy in the works of Emmanuel Lévinas and John D. Caputo. I am going to examine the historical connections between those authors. The notion of heteronomy will be analyzed in the framework of the idea of autonomy that has gained its most developed form in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Critical analysis of the use of the philosophy of Lévinas and Caputo will enable me to raise the question about the limitations of the heteronymous approach in ethics. According to my thesis, it is not possible to create a purely heteronomous concept; yet, neither should pure autonomous ethics be pursued. These two attitudes must coexist with each other for the establishment of the possibility of a real moral response to the Other.

Keywords: heteronomy, autonomy, subject, ethics, the Other.