

Social Responsibility through the Lens of Emmanuel Levinas and the Filipino Value of Sociality

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Abstract: Social responsibility is incumbent upon all human beings because all are called to be ethical toward their neighbors in a disinterested way. What social responsibility demands is radical and is met when we heed the plea of that anonymous other whose face, both high and humble, triggers our guilt for the good life we enjoy and their dire condition. As Levinas insists, the face of the Other summons us to action. Where in our experience as Filipino can we locate such a high ethical standard? Many Filipino scholars claim that sociality is one of the strongest traits of the Filipino people. They are resilient in the face of trials and tribulations because of the person next to them who is willing to lend a helping hand. In the present world order and the current Philippine context, there is a high demand for each person to act more responsibly toward the person next to him. Social responsibility is challenged by the renewed threats of war on a global scale, the resurgence of old injustices like corruption and grave abuse of power, and, likewise by rampant violation of human rights. Therefore, in this article, we ask the primary question: where in our experiences as human beings can we find the notion of social responsibility that recognizes the inviolability of the Other? In answering this, the following tasks are undertaken: first, an exposition of the brief outline of Levinas' notion of responsibility; second, an unfolding of Filipino sociality through the concepts of *kapwa* and *pagpapakatao*; and third, a thematic discussion of the converging and diverging points between Levinas' notion of social responsibility and Filipino sociality to show that responsibility is a universal value with many faces.

Keywords: Emancipation, Justice, *Kapwa*, Other, *Pagpapakatao*, Sociality, Face

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Introduction

Social responsibility undergirds our ethical vocation as human beings. This means, we are constantly at the beck and call of the Other. The Other comes to us in any way that it wants, more often than not, annoying or unpleasant and at a time when it is most inconvenient or unholy. Herein, we find that the demand of social responsibility is radical; it is not when we respond positively to the plea of a beloved. Rather, it is when we are, according to Emmanuel Levinas, held hostage by the face of that anonymous Other who, in his height and humility, summons us to action and makes us feel guilty for the good life that we enjoy and the bad condition that he is in. In this article we ask the question: where in our experience as Filipino, can we find the notion of social responsibility? To be able to answer this question, the following discussions shall be undertaken: first, I briefly outline Levinas' notion of responsibility in order to describe its basic features; second, I describe Filipino sociality through the concepts of *kapwa* and *pagpapakatao*; and third, I thematically discuss the converging and diverging points between Levinas' notion of social responsibility and Filipino sociality in order to show the universality of the value of responsibility towards the Other.

Social Responsibility via Levinasian Lens

Levinas, essentially a phenomenologist,¹ describes his notion of social responsibility using the following concepts: traumatism, escape, "there is," *jouissance*, totality and infinity, experience, and the face. Through the phenomenological method of description, Levinas demonstrated the banality of social responsibility, i.e., it is an everyday experience that we cannot escape from.

The Drama of the Struggle for Identity

In his discussion of social responsibility, Levinas takes off from the experience of violence and confesses his own fair share of it, as Theodor Peperzak avers: "the forebodings, the reality, and the memory of the Holocaust" never left him and in fact, they have always accompanied his thinking.² It is almost paradoxical that his ethical theory is anchored on the trauma of the war: on the one hand, he imputes guilt upon human beings for the crimes they committed during the war but on the

¹ Simon Critchley, "Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 283.

² Adrian Theodor Peperzak, "Emmanuel Levinas," in *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1983), 2-3.

other hand, he believes that human beings have the power to do good to others. In broad strokes, the experience of trauma or violence sets in motion and intensifies not just the struggle for life but also the responsibility for the other. A consequence of the experience of violence is the stubborn attempt of the “I” to maintain itself, which Levinas belabored to explain from the point of view of Baruch Spinoza’s *conatus essendi* and Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein*.³ Furthermore, Levinas’ understanding of the struggle for life or persevering in being is informed by Thomas Hobbes’ description of the natural tendencies of human beings: Levinas agrees with Hobbes in the idea that the natural and spontaneous striving for self-preservation of human beings make them egocentric to the point of treating other human beings as mere instruments for the attainment of self-serving interests.⁴ To curve this violence, the Hobbesian solution justifies the repressive power of the Leviathan in order to “ensure that everyone can enjoy as much freedom and benefit and put an end or prevent violence amongst its subjects.”⁵ Moreover, the 19th-century evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, which posed “survival of the fittest” as a process for natural selection contributed to the devaluation of human life and reinforced the idea that life is one big struggle to persist in being. As Roger Burggraeve maintains:

That ‘I’ exist and live is not at all obvious, but it is so precarious that it must be conquered. My life is not simply given to me as an indisputable fact or an unassailable gift, which therefore implies that my existence itself has become struggle. In the ‘struggle for life’ I enter into a relationship with existence: life can only become my life when I appropriate it to myself – undergoing trials and tribulations without the ability to appropriate it entirely.⁶

In the experience of trauma and violence, the dramatic struggle for identity and the persistent desire to exist is revealed in the most visceral way. For Levinas, the “I” as field of tension between fullness and emptiness, being and non-being is an incessant attempt at remaining itself and becoming more and more itself.⁷ In general, trauma and violence as immediate life experiences, leads to the reflection and realization that in the fragility of human existence, solitude is not an option.

³ See Eduardo Jose E. Calasanz, “Ethics with a Human Face,” in *Commentaries on Moral Philosophy*, edited by Rainier R.A. Ibana and Angelli F. Tugado (Pasig City: CHED, 1998), 164.

⁴ Roger Burggraeve, S.D.B., *Proximity with the Other: A Multidimensional Ethic of Responsibility in Levinas* (Bangalore, India: Dharmaram Publications, 2009), 22-23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

The Necessity of the Desire to Persevere in Being

The struggle for life or the desire to persevere in being, heightens egoism, which is characterized by the desire for enjoyment or happiness. Levinas describes this enjoyment as ontological necessity, natural and healthy, and prior to any moral judgment.⁸ In this context, the primordial tendency of the ego is to live for itself and secure any means available and attainable to maintain a happy existence. As all activities of the “I” tend towards self-gratification, all ends or outcomes are recalibrated according to what is in its best interest. In this centripetal movement, the “subject-object” mode is activated, making the “I” the measure of all things and the center of the universe towards which all things find their way. Eduardo Calasanz contextualizes this radical egocentricity in the context of thinking, knowing, and ingesting where all things are treated as objects, materials, or instruments that are at the service or disposal of the “I.”⁹ In other words, the “I” in its inwardness becomes the origin of meaning and determines whether or not something is valuable, i.e., usable or consumable. In this sense, the act of knowing, with its totalizing penchant, widens the gap that separates the “I” from the truly Other, hence exacerbating the solitude of being and obstructing sociality, which for Levinas will be a way of escaping being.¹⁰

The Hypostasis of the “I”

Levinas unfolds his notion of the “there is” (il y a) in his early works, titled: *Existence and Existents* (1947) and *Time and the Other* (1947). “There is” as the phenomenon of the absolutely impersonal being, absorbs everything in its imposing inevitability and reduces everything to no-thing and no-one.¹¹ In this regard, Levinas elucidates the process of hypostasis or the struggle of the ‘I’ to conquer the horrible anonymity or neutrality of the “there is.” However, in this inward movement of self-identification, the ‘I’ cannot maintain itself as an identity that is free and responsible-for-itself because it remains inadequate or empty in the tautological circle of the ‘I am I’. It needs the other-than-itself in order to give real content to itself as a free and responsible being. Realizing its inadequacy, the “I” turns to the world for its needs. Levinas calls this first alterity.¹² In doing so, it sees the world as providing resources for its needs, convertible to food, clothing, and shelter. Because of this, the “I”

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Calasanz, *Ethics with a Human Face*, 164.

¹⁰ See BC Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York, London: Continuum, 2004), 15. See Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 60-61.

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 48. See also Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other*, 10.

¹² Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other*, 12.

pursued mastery over the world through forms of knowledge that conceptualize, categorize, and systematize. In the act of knowing, the “I” steps out of itself in order to tend towards the world only to come full circle in support of its struggle for life or persevere in being.

In his essay titled, *On Escape*, published in 1935, Levinas asks if it is possible to transcend, in thinking, the horizon of Being. By asking this, Levinas attempts to overcome the ontology of Heidegger.¹³ Herein, Levinas’ immediate concern is getting the “I” out of itself. Early on, we discussed that the “I” is preoccupied with the task of struggling for life and the search for happiness. Escape, therefore, is an important guidepost on the way to understanding Levinas’ notion of social responsibility. Levinas uses terms such as rupture and explosion to express the need to break away from tendencies that totalize and possess, like those that we mentioned hitherto, to wit: ingestion, work, and thinking. The totalization of the human being at the hands of other human beings is what is deeply disturbing. For example, does it bother us when human beings are reduced to mere figures or statistics? We find this very common in the news that we read or listen to every day, referring simply to numbers and not individual persons, to wit: number of unemployed, number of poor, number of alleged drug-related deaths, number of out-of-school youth, and the list can only go on and on. When we only see numbers, we tend to be bothered less because numbers hide from us the fact that a victim is a person who has an incomparable value and inviolable dignity. It is not our intention here to reduce Levinas’ notion of escape from being to numbers or statistics. Rather, what we mean is that any totalizing approach produces a depersonalizing effect, which may hardly motivate a person to get up and do something meaningful for another person, especially those who are anonymous. Levinas refers to the concept of time, language, and subjectivity in order to presuppose a being that breaks free from totality and, therefore, delineates a pluralism and consequently, an experience: one being’s reception of an absolutely other being.¹⁴ In other words, by escape, Levinas questions the happy spontaneity of the “I” and beckons it to make an act of deposition *en route* to social responsibility. Moreover, Levinas proclaimed the need for thought beyond ontology in his book, titled: *Existence to Existents*. Herein, Levinas refers to Plato to sketch a global perspective of thought as a movement toward the Good above being.¹⁵ We gather, therefore, that what moves the “I” towards the good is not self-preservation but the departure from the tautology of self-referentiality. We find in Levinas’ notion

¹³ Peperzak, “Emmanuel Levinas,” 2.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Signature,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1999), 293.

¹⁵ Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other*, 29.

of escape the idea that the Other is the center, and time, as the ultimate horizon, determines the relations between the Other and me.¹⁶

Being Servant to My Neighbor

For Levinas, the first social relationship is radical dissymmetry where it is imperative that I look up to another person as someone who imposes respect and devotion, The Other stands at the top of my hierarchy of values, and I am beholden to it before anything else as “the other is characterized by height or highness.” The absoluteness with which the Other’s existence transcends the claims of my self-centered universe by more radical demands is what Levinas calls infinity... we must be the servant of our neighbor.¹⁷ Hence, For Levinas, our existence is affirmed or validated not by the mere fact of persevering in being but by our liberation from our own constricting egotism. In other words, we are liberated by our ethical response when we encounter the Other who reveals its face to us. This Other deposes me and imposes itself upon me as my priority. Herein, we find the non-asymmetrical relation between the Other and “I.” The primacy of the Other, is such that Levinas speaks of the passivity of the “I” before the other, like a deer in headlights, so to say. Social responsibility, therefore, for Levinas, is the radical interpretation of the formula of etiquette: *apres vous* (after you, please!) and *me voici* (Here I am!).¹⁸ In light of these, the Other, as it confronts me by revealing its face to me, subordinates, conscientizes, and obligates me to be at its service before myself. Levinas emphatically points out the non-symmetrical and non-reciprocal characteristic of intersubjective relation by quoting Fyodor Dostoyevsky: “we are all guilty of all and for men before all, and I more than the others.”¹⁹

As previously pointed out, for Levinas, the Other takes precedence over the “I,” therefore, the relation that exists between them is non-asymmetrical. This is emphatically expressed in the face-to-face relation where access to face is straightaway ethical, i.e., what is specifically face is that which cannot be comprehended or reduced to content.²⁰ In other words, the face, which is meaning or signification all by itself

¹⁶ Peperzak, “Emmanuel Levinas,” 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Droit, Roger-Pol Droit, *The Other Above Everything*, trans. Leovino Ma. Garcia. This article appeared in the January 6, 2006 issue of *Le Monde*.

¹⁹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98. Cf., Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Constance Garnett (New York: American Library, 1957), 264. According to Levinas, we are responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity for reciprocity is the Other’s affair.

²⁰ Simon Critchley, “Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 284.

imposes itself upon us and not the other way around. According to Levinas, the face fundamentally forbids us to kill,²¹ an ethical demand, which is as visceral as it gets, an experience *par excellence*.²² We can visualize this by recalling that time when a stranger approached us asking for scraps or leftovers from our table or spare changes in our pockets that we barely give value to. How did we respond? How did we look at the face of the Other? Did we show indifference, or did we react condescendingly? Did we allow ourselves to be moved during the face-to-face encounter? Whatever our response was, there is a good chance that the face of that person lingered on in our thoughts for a while. The bottom line is that we find ourselves confronted by the demanding presence of the Other. The central fact, Levinas insists is “not just of ethics but also of humanity as such, which is to be found in the rupture brought about in the world by this manifestation of the Other, who imposes himself in a mode very different from that of things.”²³ The fact of the face’s epiphany is an irony: it imposes its inviolability in its utter nakedness, weakness, misery, and vulnerability. This face, which is a metonymy, i.e., represents not just the countenance of the person but what it is, whole and entire, i.e., spirit, soul, and body. In this sense, to be responsible for the Other is to be concerned as to whether or not what I do puts the Other in harm’s way. Levinas expresses this with an air of scrupulosity because the “I” is worried and upset that in its care for itself, it may cause damage or worse inflict death upon the Other. The “I” whatever its status in life is, is obliged to find the resources to respond to the call of the Other.²⁴

Responsibility as Radically in Favor of the Other

In a general way, responsibility, for Levinas, means putting the Other before oneself. Responsibility is radical and absolutely one-sided, always in favor of the Other. In a manner of speaking, I am obliged to sacrifice my life for the Other if the situation beckons it, but I cannot demand from the Other the same gesture, lest I be held liable for murder.²⁵ While Levinas insists that we are all responsible for one another, our responsibility towards the Other is the stronger and more urgent calling. The imperative to respond to the call of the Other is precisely the inordinate and infinite responsibility of “being-for-the-other” before oneself, which for Levinas

²¹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.

²² Levinas, “Signature,” 293.

²³ Droit, “The Other.”

²⁴ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89.

²⁵ Adrian Theodor, Pepezrak, “Jewish Existence and Philosophy,” in *Beyond the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1983), 13.

constitutes the core of ethical relation.²⁶ For Levinas, there is no responsibility more urgent than when the Other appears to me in its humility or nakedness to the point that I am infinitely responsible for it. It is almost like saying, my rights are undermined, perhaps even negated, by my responsibility and I must give myself on demand, at the whim of the Other. Peperzak describes this inordinate and obsessive Other-centeredness in the structure of “the-one-for-the-Other” which, “constitutes me as a unique individual, because nobody can replace me for the task it implies... to have conscience means that I am a hostage (*otage*) for the Other.”²⁷

In struggling to understand Levinas, there is an eerie feeling that he imposes a responsibility that is at the same time too heavy to bear and too high to reach. The “I” as deposed, must surrender his rights, even his most primordial or spontaneous desire to be happy. We can opine that his notion of responsibility arose from his reflections on his tragic past. He must have set his bar too high now because, in the past, men have shown themselves to be too low. High or heavy, Levinas’ notion of responsibility is a light that can guide us in our relationship with the Other. But Levinas is not a solitary figure in search of that ideal ethical relationship between human beings. We can discern or locate aspects of his ethical views in our own experience as Filipino.

Social Responsibility in the Filipino Context: From the Self to the Other

Sociality is one of the strongest traits of the Filipino people.²⁸ The Filipino is resilient in the face of formidable foes or challenges because he can always find the person next to him willing to lend a helping hand. This strong and endearing trait is expressed in various ways and here, we recall a few, beginning from indigenous notions of individuality and sociality to more recent experiences that exemplify our people-centered orientations.

From Self-Referentiality

The Filipino terms *sarili*, *katauhan*, and *pagkatao* refer to the self. These terms contain both the moral and psychological personality of the Filipino, more

²⁶ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 12.

²⁷ Peperzak, “Jewish Existence and Philosophy,” 13-14.

²⁸ See, Jeremiah Reyes, “Loób and Kapwa: An Introduction to a Filipino Virtue Ethics,” *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2015): 148–171, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2015.1043173> Reyes, cites the American anthropologist Frank Lynch who famously coined the term ‘smooth interpersonal relationships’ to describe the greatest value of Filipino culture. See also Lynch, 1962, “Philippine Values II: Social Acceptance,” *Philippine Studies*, 10(1), p. 89.

specifically, their attitudes, habits, sets of values, principles, norms, and ideals that give them their moral form and distinguish them from others.²⁹ Moreover, Leonardo Mercado describes *sarili* as the “whole self” which brings together attributes such as body, soul, and spirit equipped with existential faculties like intellect, freedom, and voluntariness.³⁰ *Sarili*, as a term, when combined with the prefix *maka*, connotes a pejorative meaning. The term *makasarili* is used to designate a person who is selfish or egocentric; fully preoccupied with the attainment of goals or interests that serve only the best interest of the individual or the in-group, locally known as *sakop*. The *sakop* system, which social scientists attribute to the *barangay* system,³¹ engenders a kind of short-sighted view, where gains or benefits are committed exclusively for the sake of the in-group. Impliedly, this means that it is better for the people of the same region to help one another than for gains to be shared with outsiders.³² Nevertheless, the notion of *sarili* presupposes social responsibility in the sense that *sarili*, is open to encounter with another *sarili*.

Toward Social Responsibility

There is a Filipino maxim, which expresses the drama of the traversal from *sarili* to the other, to wit: “*madaling maging tao ngunit mahirap magpakatao*” (It is easy to become a man but difficult to be human). Herein, we find that the Filipino acknowledges the radical demand and fundamental difficulty of sociality: it is a challenge to be selfless or be open to the possibility of sacrificing personal goals for the sake of uplifting or serving one’s neighbor. In other words, being truly a *tao* connotes a sense of social responsibility, which entails transcending self-centeredness to become people-oriented. *Pagpapakatao* is fully achieved when one does good to others even to the point of committing violence to oneself, i.e., in the act of offering oneself as substitute to carry the burden of another person. This makes *pagpapakatao* an arduous endeavor as opposed to selfishness or *pagkamakasarili*, which is easier and more attractive. In broad strokes, *pagkamakatao* is defined as the common way of connecting to the self, others, and the rest of reality.³³ We can find in F. Landa Jocano, a more precise description, to wit: the Filipino who transcends personal interests is

²⁹ Dionisio M. Miranda, *Loob: The Filipino Within, A Preliminary Investigation into a Pre-Theological Moral Anthropology* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 1988), 26-27.

³⁰ Mercado, Leonardo N. *The Filipino Mind: Philippine Philosophical Studies II*. Manila, The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994.

³¹ See Tomas D. Andres and Pilar Corazon B Ilada-Andres, *Making Filipino Values Work for You* (Manila: Saint Paul Publications, 1986), 29.

³² See *Ibid.*, 31.

³³ Dionisio Miranda, *Pagkamakatao: Reflections on the Theological Virtues in the Philippine Context*. Manila: Logos Publications Inc. 1987, 6.

regarded as *makatao* and is able to cultivate *pagkamakatao*.³⁴ Herein, we gather that *pagpapakatao* implies that the self or *sarili* is open to encounter with others, which as we have aforementioned, sets in motion the initial experience of social responsibility.

The Filipino's sense of social responsibility cannot be fully comprehended without taking into consideration the term *kapwa* or *kapuwa*. Loosely translated as "fellow being" and "other person," *kapwa* implies shared identity or interdependent relationships.³⁵ This understanding stresses the interconnection between the self and the other because they are bonded by "same nature" or "shared orientation." This relationship is also demonstrated by terminologies, which are used to designate siblings like *kaputol* or *kapatid*, which means "cut from the same umbilical cord."³⁶ Thus, the notion of *kapwa*, encompassing the self and the other, is truly an equalizer because it focuses on the dignity and well-being of both parties. In this sense, *pakikipagkapwa* is considered as an authentic social value compared to *pakikisama* which would be no more than a social norm.³⁷ Herein, *kapwa*, which as aforementioned, stresses "same nature" and "shared orientation" dissolves notions of divisions or social stratification, such as rich or poor, learned or illiterate, fair-skinned or dark colored. Katrin de Guia opines that "individuals who are guided by the values of *pakikipag-kapwa* can be recognized by their genuine people-centered orientation, their service to those around them, and their commitment to their communities."³⁸ Thus, *kapwa* engenders a heightened sense of interdependence or social responsibility, which means reciprocal relations or mutual giving and receiving. In this context, *kapwa* implies that both the self and the other are inadequate, therefore, almost always in need of one another. This is where the notion of *kapwa* implies *malasakit* or compassion, or the willingness to "suffer with" a neighbor who is in need.

Over-all, the terms *sarili*, *tao*, and *kapwa*, pointing to the psychological personality and moral character, contain basic insights regarding the disposition of the Filipino people towards inter-subjectivity. The concept of *sarili*, even though it

³⁴ Jocano, F. Landa, *Filipino Value System* (Manila: Punlad Research House Inc., 1997), 42.

³⁵ See Miranda, *Loob*, 113, quoting Virgilio Enriquez, "Filipino Psychology in the Third World," *Philippine Journal of Psychology* 10, 1 (1977). See Katrin De Guia, *Kapwa, The Self in the Other: Worldviews and Lifestyles of Filipino Culture Bearers* (Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2005), 28.

³⁶ Mercado uses the analogy of the body to demonstrate sociality. According to him, *kaputol* and *kapatid* which means brother or sister, means cut from the same umbilical cord. See Leonardo N. Mercado, *The Filipino Mind: Philippine Philosophical Studies II* (Manila, The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 19940), 3.

³⁷ Miranda, *Loob*, 50-51.

³⁸ Katrin de Guia, *Kapwa: The Self in The Other: Worldviews And Lifestyles Of Filipino Culture-Bearers* (Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2005), 28.

pertains to the self, implies that the individual is guided by sets of values or norms connected to inter-subjectivity, which are called into action in case the self meets another. *Tao* and *Kapwa*, on the other hand, emphasize that to be fully human is to cultivate relationships through unity, participation, sharing, and compassion, concretely expressed in cultural values and modalities such as *bayanihan*, among others.

Embodiments of Filipino Social Responsibility

The terms *pagpapakatao* and *kapwa* are concretely expressed in the Filipino tradition of *bayanihan*. There are two threads that elucidate the meaning of *bayanihan*: the first is that which connects *bayanihan* to the deeds of a *bayani* (hero) and the second is that which correlates it with the words *bayan* (people, community) and *anihan* (harvest).³⁹ On the one hand, *bayani* refers to a person who possesses extraordinary courage and abilities; one who bears admirable traits and has done a significant deed; and one who is endowed with characteristics that are god-like.⁴⁰ In the context of *bayanihan*, when an individual is called to actively participate in collective actions, the unique or special traits of this *bayani* are transformed into socio-personal values. On the other hand, the terms *bayan* and *anihan*, taken altogether, emphasize “working together” “mostly demonstrated when farmers reach out to their neighbors in the planting and harvesting of rice as well as in other community endeavors. Tomas Andres enumerates the following values which encapsulate *bayanihan*, namely: “*pagkakaisa ng layunin* (unity of objective), *pagkakaisa ng kilos* (brotherhood), *pagpapaunlad ng bawat isa* (developing of everyone), *masigasig na paggawa* (devoted and whole-hearted work), *kinikilala ang malakas at pinalalakas ang mahihina* (recognizing the strong one and strengthening the weak ones), and *pag-ibig at katapatan* (love and loyalty).”⁴¹

The Filipino Mythic Man: Imbued With Social Responsibility

In 1990, Sunday Inquirer Magazine featured a Filipino named Manuel Buenaventura under the headline “A Special Kind of Champ.” The article tells the story of a newspaper delivery guy who won the prestigious national cycling competition,

³⁹ See *Historical Dictionary of the Philippines*, 2012, 3rd ed., s.v. “Bayanihan,” 69. See also Republic of the Philippines, Department of Agrarian Reform, retrieved May 4, 2015 from <http://www.dar.gov.ph/contact-us/9-main>.

⁴⁰ UP Diksyunaryong Filipino, *Binagong Edisyon*, 2010, s.v. 1, 2, 4: 156.

⁴¹ Tomas Andres, Q. D. *Filipino Behavior at Work: Human Relations and Organizational Behavior in the Philippine Setting*, (Quezon City, 2001), 116. Translation mine.

more famously known as Tour of Luzon. What is special about Buenaventura? The circumstances of his life make him an unlikely champion, to wit: He was described as a frail young man who hails from Quezon City; he only had a month to prepare for the competition; he had neither special cycling skills nor a coach to guide him; apparently, he never harbored dreams of making it big, more so winning the tour, he was quoted saying: “*sa top ten lang maligaya na ako, dahil pag nasa top ten ka, may sinasabi ka na sa tour*”; poverty hindered him from achieving his aspiration of becoming an auto mechanic; the strength of this man was “just to be there:” sticking it out with the big names through all sorts of roads, plains, rising, descending; the cheering crowds and the top seeds were oblivious to his efforts; he emerged as the overall winner even if he did not win a single lap; witnesses claimed that he deliberately forfeited his chance to win one particular lap, letting another teammate win lap honors and the prize money; with humble demeanor he reasoned that the lap should belong to less fortunate cyclists, he quipped: “*hinahangad ko lang yung makalayo. Eh pag may kasama sa amin na wala sa over-all, sabi ko magtulungan na lamang tayo, tapos, yung lap sa inyo na. Kailangan din nila ng pera.*”⁴²

Buenaventura is a special case as his gestures epitomize social responsibility, which in the Filipino context conveys what it means to be tao and kapwa. We could all agree that he could have changed his fortune for the better by being more competitive, considering that he had the ability to win “more laps and, therefore, more money had he wanted to. The bottom line is that Buenaventura’s notion of winning is unconventional: he perceived success as sharing his well-being with his rivals.”⁴³ To make sense of what Buenaventura has exemplified in his life, we shall borrow N.V.M. Gonzales’ description of the Filipino as the Mythic Man: one who is content with being at home in the world and being human. Gonzales’ description of the Filipino brings back mythical and cosmic wisdom, to wit:

Filipinos are a people whose past is rooted in the cyclical time of their ancient myths. During this era of wandering seas and strange storms, life went on in cycles of planting and reaping, sailing and arriving, walking and finding. These were innocent times of primordial oneness with the world, where the sky was so near that the people could touch it with their hands. The ancient ones were able to connect to anyone and everything at all times. The mythic man remained free always to tap into his expanded consciousness of sacred time and place. *Pagkatao* (personhood) upholds the ancient, every including viewpoint of the mythic man where being

⁴² De Guia, *Kapwa*, 2-3. “All I wanted was to reach this far into the game. But when one of us does not get to the over-all, I suggested that we just help each other and they can win the lap themselves. Besides, they also need the money.” Translation mine.

⁴³ Ibid.

human means being connected to other human beings and where each individual, although unique is an integral part of humanity (*kapwa-tao*).⁴⁴

The case of Buenaventura is an opening for the discussion of the Filipino who is primordially social and responsible. Buenaventura's story harks back to Gonzales' notion of the mythical sense of the Filipino: a being who is connected to his environment, community, and self. The Filipino's deep interior and extensive exterior evoke this reality. More specifically, reckoning Buenaventura's example, his sense of self is inextricably intertwined with others. His ability to transcend the circumstances of competition and sacrifice his self-gratification for the good of others reflects this empathetic and profound connection towards his neighbor who is in need. Thus, because of his sense of social responsibility, his own welfare comes only second in relation to the needs of others, which he regards as more urgent. We hope to go deeper into these discussions as we progress and we shall time and again go back to the story of Buenaventura to put in context our succeeding discussions. But suffice it to say, we have just scratched the surface of the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of the Filipino and in what follows, we shall view these from the structures of *loob* and *kapwa*, respectively.

Expressions of Sociality in Recent Philippine History

Buenaventura represents many Filipino people who feel genuine connection and empathy towards their compatriots. We can find his likeness in the many historical accounts that recount the stories of how countless Filipinos summoned their will to realize social responsibility to engender social transformation. The events at EDSA in 1986, which serve as a basket case for participative or collective action at its best, became a paradigm for other nations which similarly aspire for social and political changes. The unprecedented peaceful revolution validated the Filipinos' grit and courage, purpose and strength, unity and concern for each another. EDSA, highlights *pakikibaka*⁴⁵ which implies cooperative resistance against a present evil or injustice to effect social change. Partisan politics aside, EDSA People Power can be thoughtfully remembered and looked upon as a light that should guide the Filipino people in their quest for national solidarity. It can be opined that this memory is necessary for a people who are said to have a very short memory, as time and time again, they regress back to being fragmented not only geographically but also socially, politically, and economically.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 32.

Moreover, the Buenaventuras in us come to life in times of natural calamities, which through unfortunate events, persistently keep alive the spirit of *bayanihan* and move the Filipino people to remember their primordial connection with their *kababayans* (countrymen). The Task Force Tabang Mindanao in 1998 was able to gather more than twenty-five million pesos to help feed the hungry in Mindanao. When typhoon Milenyo devastated the Bicol region in 2006, the Manilans responded open-handedly to the distress call. In 2009, in the aftermath of the tropical storm *Ondoy*, the call for solidarity generated vast relief aids, which included those coming from a caravan from the Bicol region. This response underscored the time-honored value of *damayan*, as it comes as a gesture of reciprocity from the Bicolanos who were once at the receiving end of such selfless deeds. As one Bicolano remarked, “we want to repay their kindness even in a small way; we want to make a difference in their lives now since we know how it is to be hit by calamities.”⁴⁶ In more recent memory, typhoon Yolanda, which caused unprecedented destruction to lives and properties on a global scale, likewise brought the Filipinos together to a show of force that is unmistakably *bayanihan* in its spirit.

Filipino social responsibility thrives in times of need. It is a testament to the resolve of the Filipino people to move collectively and sacrifice willingly their personal welfare to achieve collective ends. The iconic representation of *bayanihan* as one of the most, if not the most, typical traits of the Filipino is this image: a group of men bearing upon their shoulder a nipa hut in an effort to transfer it to safer grounds. We can aver that this image captures and inculturates social responsibility as a universal and timeless value. This symbolic representation describes the willingness of every Filipino to offer one’s shoulder to help ease the load or burden of a *kababayan*. Herein, the act of compassion or *damay* and *malasakit* demands *pagsasantabi ng sarili upang higit na masakyan ang karanasan ng kapwa* (“setting aside one’s welfare or condition to understand and commiserate with the experience of others”).⁴⁷

Divergences and Convergences

The Filipino notion of sociality and Levinas’ social responsibility share some common notions but also differ in some respects. But what is important, and what we hope to highlight here, is that both can potentially deepen our understanding of how the “Other” should take precedence over the “I” in the name of social responsibility.

⁴⁶ *Bicolanos Send Help to Ondoy Victims in Manila* accessed last May 29, 2010 in <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/network/bicolanos-send-help-ondoy-victims-manila-548-pm>.

⁴⁷ See Albert E. Alejo, S.J., *Tao Po! Tuloy!: Isang Landas ng Pag-Unawa sa Loob ng Tao* (Quezon City: ADMU, Office for Research and Publications, 1990), 93.

Based on our recently concluded discussions, the following are what we deem as converging and diverging points between the two ethical views:

The Rule of the Ego

Levinas' notion egoism is comparable to what is called *makasarili* in Filipino. Both terms convey the attitude of a person who is confined to selfish interests and characterized by pejorative traits, to wit: objectification, material enjoyment, manipulation, planning, and exploitation from a pattern, which could be characterized by the egonomy: the rule of the ego.⁴⁸ We find these tendencies implied in Levinas's understanding of the ego which is primarily characterized by the spontaneous love of life, happiness, self-centered affectivity, and in the most primal way, self-preservation. Egocentrism in Levinas and *makasarili* in the Filipino context constitute an individual's emphasis and insistence on independence that effectively separates him or her from all other individuals. In this atomistic sense, the fundamental affectivity of enjoyment explains the fact that each ego is unique and radically solitary thus, overly preoccupied with the task of self-preservation both implied in Levinas' notion of egoism and the Filipino understanding of *makasarili*.⁴⁹

Social Responsibility as Self-Deposition

In the Filipino notion of *pagpapakatao* and Levinas' concept of epiphany or revelation, the ego or *sarili* is confronted by or comes face-to-face with the Other. What is the impact of this encounter? It is the dislodging or deposing of oneself from a position of power or giving up one's advantages for the sake of the other to the point of self-sacrifice. This act of self-denial, as an aftermath of coming face to face with the other, sets in motion the initial experience of social responsibility. And our understanding of social responsibility is necessarily entwined with our notion of the Other. The Other in Levinas and *kapwa* in the Filipino context, breaks the ego's domination of the world and imposes an infinite number of demands on the ego by the mere fact of appearing. The other's face, my *kapwa*, by the mere gaze that he or she gives to me, orders me to be responsible for his/her existence, life, and behavior,⁵⁰ an imperative that I cannot deny or escape from. As Levinas emphatically puts it, this alterity raises me in a severe responsibility, which calls me to bear all the weight of the world's seriousness in a non-indifference with – with no ontological

⁴⁸ Peperzak, "Jewish Existence and Philosophy," 8-9.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11.

basis – for the other.⁵¹ Tomas Andres avers that for the Filipino, to love is to think of what one can give of oneself to the *kapwa*.⁵² Similarly, being compassionate comes with a price: self-sacrifice, also known in Cebuano, as *pahinungod*, implying a high form of self-sacrifice or a notion of self-offering to others.⁵³ Therefore, to be socially responsible, i.e., to be *makatao*, or *maka-kapwa*, one is called to set aside personal interests in order to reach out to others lest one be stigmatized as *makasarili*.

Reciprocity as the Affair of the Other

In Levinas' notion of social responsibility, participative actions, and reciprocal relations are not to be expected. We find this implied in Levinas' response to Phillip Nemo who asked about the Other's responsibility towards the self, to wit: "I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity... Reciprocity is his affair."⁵⁴ It can be opined that this is not the same in the Filipino praxis of social responsibility where participative actions are characterized by mutual exchanges. That is why Filipinos have the concept of *ambagan*, which is akin to potluck meals, which expects participants to contribute, each according to their means, to collective efforts. Reciprocity is also implied in the sense of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), as an ambivalent value where repayment for a good deed done by another person is expected. In its inordinate sense, payment for *utang na loob* goes to the point of violating ethical standards just so, a good deed done in the past can be repaid.

Non-Asymmetry

As pointed out earlier, the Filipino concept of *kapwa* stresses "same nature" and "shared orientation" where the self and the other are interconnected, as expressed by the phrase commonly used to designate kinship: *hindi iba* (not different, related). This acquires a deeper meaning in the nomenclatures for siblings: *kaputol* or *kapatid*, which mean, "cut from the same umbilical cord." This is what strengthens the *sakop* system because one easily finds his identity in the group and therefore doing good for the good of the group redounds to doing good for oneself. For Levinas, the Other is radical alterity. However, Levinas' notion of non-symmetrical relations, in the sense of priority of the Other as underscored in the expressions, *apres vous* and *me voici*, is shared by Filipino sociality. Filipinos are to be hospitable, almost to a fault because they tend to sacrifice personal convenience to defer to the needs of their guests.

⁵¹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 13.

⁵² See Andres and Ilada-Andres, *Making Filipino Values Work for You*, 19-20.

⁵³ See Aguiling-Dalisay, *Extending the Self*, 34.

⁵⁴ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98.

Conclusion

The Filipino notion of *Kapwa* and the Levinasian Other are kindred terms. They are the same in many respects although different in some aspects too. They both enrich the meaning of social responsibility: first, by stripping the ego or sarili of its illusion of grandeur and must therefore abstain from its self-indulgence; and second, both concepts agree that they must answer to the presence of the Other in a way that the Other must be alleviated from its poverty or misery. Simply put, I just cannot be indifferent to the presence of the Other. I cannot be remiss in this responsibility, as it is more important than my own life. On the other hand, the difference lies in the way that *kapwa* defines its affinity with the other, as mentioned hitherto, the Filipino concept stresses same nature, shared identity as expressed by the terms, *hindi iba*, *kaputol*, *kapatid*, to name a few. For the Filipino, I see myself in the other and vice versa. Perhaps this is because the oriental thinking is naturally inclined towards unity or harmony. This contrasts with the Levinasian Other, which emphasizes the utter opposition or polarization between the self and Other. And maybe, Levinas bore with him the pain of the indifference of the Other that in his conception of the Other the weight of his guilt or the guilt of the other towards him weighed him down all along, as it showed in his writing. Social responsibility, therefore, is incumbent upon all human beings, as the famous Filipino song, titled “*Pananagutan*” (Responsibility) immortalized in its lyrics: *walang sinuman ang nabubuhay para sa sarili lamang, walang sinuman ang namamatay para sa sarili lamang, tayong lahat ay may panangutan sa isa’t isa* (Nobody lives just for himself, Nobody dies just for himself, all of us are responsible for one another).**PS**

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