

COMMUNICATION ETHICS OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS PERSPECTIVE

Ivan Christian¹, Yohanes Krismantyo Susanta², Yeremia Yordani Putra³

Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Amanat Agung, Jakarta^{1,3}
Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Toraja, Sulawesi Selatan²
Email: yohanessusanta@stakntoraja.ac.id

Received: 14.04.2020

Revised: 13.05.2020

Accepted: 05.06.2020

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find the concept of good communication ethics based on the perspective of Emmanuel Levinas. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach by utilizing literature studies on several kinds of literature on Levinas theory that discusses the concepts of faces and others and their contribution to communication ethics. This research shows that in Levinas perspective, communication is a form of responsibility towards others as a representation of the face of others, even the face of God. Communication ethics is a form of responsibility in opening up and accepting others to build mutual peace. I am responsible then I am, respondeo ergo sum.

Keywords: ethics, communication, Levinas, responsibility

© 2020 by Advance Scientific Research. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31838/jcr.07.14.434>

INTRODUCTION

A message that is communicated can affect, both positive and negative, as well as narrow or broad impact. One example is propaganda. According to the Big Indonesian Dictionary, propaganda is "right or wrong illumination (understanding, opinion, etc.) developed with the aim of convincing people to embrace a particular school, attitude or direction of action." One example of negative propaganda that results in the negation of the lives of others is the propaganda carried out by the Nazis on the holocaust by influencing Germans who did not or did not accept anti-semitism (Eitzen, 1936).

The Nazis used communication, both interpersonal and mass communication, to do what Martin Buber called coercion or "imposing" (Buber, 2009: 65). Nazi action is one of many examples of the power of communication that has a negative influence on others, even to the negation of life. If this continues to colour the conversation in the world, then it can be sure will increasingly mushroom the denial of experience that will occur. In this reality, the author intends to present ethical communication from the perspective of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas' thinking is very relevant in the context of an egocentric, selfish world, including in the communication process.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method by utilizing the literature study approach. Therefore, this article will utilize literature such as books and journals related to the Emmanuel Levinas concept of ethical responsibility and its influence on communication. The primary documentation of this article is a book by Levinas, among others, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, and *In the Time of Nations*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emmanuel Levinas, Self and Face

Emmanuel Levinas is a Jewish descendant who lives close to the Hebrew Bible and Talmud (Bertens, 1996: 281). As a Jew who lived during the Nazi era, Levinas also suffered as a Jew, especially when he was detained as a prisoner of war (Bertens, 1996: 281). But in such a situation, against the background of Husserl's phenomenological thinking, Levinas gave birth to works that contrasted with the efforts of domination and massacre carried out by the Nazis; a practice that voices a message of hospitality in responding to the presence of others.

Although Levinas's primary focus is not about communication, his thoughts can be a reasonable basis in the communication process. Levinas' views are more focused on "stripping the ego of its pride and the dominating imperialism characteristic of it." (Taylor, 1987: 203) In other words, Levinas wants to criticize the selfish "self" spirit, which tends to dominate the surrounding environment. In discussing his thoughts, in his book entitled *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas gave a brief explanation about communication (Levinas, 1978: 119-121). Of course, his thoughts about communication can not be separated from the frame of thinking that he has about "Face" or other people, and how the self must be responsible for the presence of others.

Levinas's thought about "Face" comes as a critique of modern philosophical thought or Western philosophy that emphasizes the ego. For Levinas, all Western philosophy is a philosophy that pursues totality, which wants to build an overall knowledge and understanding of reality by stemming from the "ego" (Bertens, 1996: 288). In this case, totality can be understood as a "reign of the same wherein everything and everybody exists as part of a whole or as a case under the law." (Waldenfels, 2002: 66) This selfish totality of the self can also be seen as the totality of the person, which ultimately places itself as a god or idols (Ford, 1999: 47).

However, the presence of the face as exteriority (something that is outside of myself "I") ultimately requires the self to step out of themselves to meet others (Bertens, 1996: 288). For Levinas, attendance and face-to-face encounters are ethical events; Faces greet, disturb and invite responses from themselves (Adiprasetya, 1998: 137).

For Levinas, the guidance for a person to act towards another person is the Scriptures, especially the Torah. Levinas in his book *Ethics and Infinity*, as quoted by Michael Purcell (2006: 34), said that the Scriptures are "the book par excellence", which gives meaning and direction in human life. The purpose of life begins in ethical encounters with others and responsibilities towards others, which are experienced in human relations and are ordered by the Scriptures (Purcell, 2006: 34). In the light of this understanding, of course, the responsibility that someone needs to do is the responsibility according to God set in the Scriptures.

In the light of the Scriptures, Levinas argues that humans as individuals who are similar to God become the same as God who

is the "soul of the universe" (Levinas, 1994: 125), who is called to be like God in the world of "creating goodness, expiating, and infinitely loving." (Morrison, 2003: 10) Humans as the "image of God" have been enabled by God to be responsible to others, even the whole world, because human likeness with God makes: "[t] he acts, words and thoughts of man have some power over the created world and forces of creation." (Levinas, 1994: 125-126) For Levinas, what is important to note is how humans respond, whether they obey God and the Scriptures or vice versa.

So far, it can be concluded that Levinas sees himself not as a totalitarian subject to the existence of others. "Self" is not a person who has absolute freedom, but must stand opposed to the spirit of modernism that pursues totality, which affects human attitudes that assume "[e] verything is allowed, nothing is forbidden. Nothing, perhaps, is forbidden any longer as regards our dealings with the other man." (Levinas, 1990: 285) If the self possesses the spirit of such totality, then the relationship created is a one-way relationship, closed, and oppressing others. This is evident from the Nazi zeal that ultimately resulted in tyranny that oppressed the existence of others, even killing others. The self should be an open person, ready to relate and act (read: responsible), also injured, when welcoming the arrival of others.

Communication is Responsible

An open self and ready to be responsible in the presence of others, this is the basis of Levinas's thinking about communication. In light of that thought, communication cannot be seen merely as a process of delivering information from one person to another. Successful communication is not merely judged by whether a message is conveyed well, or whether the message delivered has an effect - which was expected in advance - on the recipient of the message. Communication also cannot be seen from the perspective of profit and loss; in the sense of ending or continuing a relationship depends on the calculation of profit and loss from related individuals. Even Levinas argues that "to communicate is indeed to open oneself, but the openness is not complete if it is on the watch for recognition." (Levinas, 1978: 119) In other words, communicating is the same as opening up for others, accepting the presence of others. In this context, the acceptance is done not because someone craves a sure "reward". Such openness is asymmetrical.

Self-disclosure in asymmetric relations or communication is undoubtedly vulnerable to make someone become injured due to the relationship. In this connection, Levinas does remind that "it is in the risky uncovering of oneself, insincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability." (Levinas, 1978: 48). In other words, Levinas would like to say that indeed the possibility of being injured in this asymmetrical relationship must be prepared to be faced by the self-responsible for others (*respondeo ergo sum*). Someone as God's creation should be able to love, bring goodness, help people to correct their mistakes, and even be willing to defend and replace others who experience difficulties in life, even though life is at stake. *Respondeo ergo sum*, I am responsible, so I am there.

CONCLUSION

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that Levinas provides an ethical perspective which is essential in communication. Levinas's thinking can complement Buber's thoughts about communication, especially in terms of ethics that should appear in the communication process. In all communication processes, from building perceptions, verbal and nonverbal communication, to ending a relationship, all must be lived based on the ethical perspective of Levinas, *respondeo ergo sum*. By doing this, let a peaceful and loving social environment be created, not chaos or even the negation of life.

REFERENCES

1. Adiprasetya, Joas. 1999. Merayakan Hidup Bersama: Menemukan Etika Global dengan Kacamata Emmanuel Levinas. *Jurnal Pelita Zaman*, 13 (2), 135-146.
2. Bertens, K. 1996. *Filsafat Barat Abad XX Jilid II*: Prancis. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
3. Buber, Martin. 2009. *Elements of Interhuman*. Dalam Stewart, John (ed.), *Bridges not Walls: A Book About Interpersonal Communications*, tenth edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.
4. Eitzen, Kurt Hilmar. 1936. *Ten Responses to Jewish Lackeys*. Diakses pada 25 Mei 2020 dari <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/responses.htm>
5. Ford, David F. 1999. *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Levinas, Emmanuel. 1978. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Diterjemahkan oleh Alphonso Lingis). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
7. Levinas, Emmanuel. 1990. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Diterjemahkan oleh Seán Hand). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
8. Levinas, Emmanuel. 1994. *In the Time of Nations* (Diterjemahkan oleh Michael B. Smith). Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
9. Morrison, Glen J. *Emmanuel Levinas and Christian Theology*. *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 68 (1), 3-24.
10. Purcell, Michael. 2006. *Levinas and Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. Taylor, Mark C. 1987. *Altarity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
12. Waldenfels, Wernhard. 2002. *Levinas and the Face of the Other*. Dalam Critchley, Simon dan Bernasconi, Robert (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 63-81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.