CLOSING RANKS BEHIND POSTMODERN THOUGHT: A REVIEW OF LEVINAS, ADORNO AND ZYGMUNT BAUMAN FROM THE STANDPOINT OF ETHICS

Mahdi Teimouri[1]

Abstract

The comparative study of Emmanuel Levinas and Theodore Adorno has received much attention in the past few years. The general consensus is that Levinas and Adorno, while sharing some similarities, are intrinsically different. This paper is an attempt to reinvestigate Levinas-Adorno axis from the standpoint of postmodern thought. Defined by Simon During as the thought that refuses to turn the other to the same, postmodern thought is imbued with an antagonism toward totalizing trends. At the same time such hostility to totalization contains ethical overtones analogous to Levinasian ethics. By introducing the ethical implications of this thought, the paper seeks to emphasize that Adorno's critique of enlightenment overlaps with postmodern thought and Levinasian ethics in its repudiation of totalizing tendencies of Western thought. The concluding section of this paper aims to briefly explore the aggregate impact of Levinas and Adorno on Zygmunt Bauman who like his mentors is interested in decrying the de-sensitizing outcome of cleaving to instrumental rationality and order-creating in modernity.

Key words: postmodern thought, dialectic of enlightenment, Levinasian ethics, postmodern ethics, ambivalence

Introduction

Critical attention has recently been drawn to a comparative study of Levinas and Adorno. Most often, such studies point to the existence of radical differences between them. However, despite their seeming dissimilarities, they share the characteristic of being highly critical of enlightenment thinking. In addition, what separates them from one another are the means they employed and the ends they sought to achieve in their critique of enlightenment. According to Alford, Levinas and the Frankfurt School deal with 'the tendency toward totalization [. . .] the reduction of the other to the same, the elimination of difference' (2002:232). In a similar vein, Peter Dews (2008:187) maintains that the philosophies of Adorno and Levinas identify the 'drive toward the absorption of otherness' as 'the dominant feature of Western thought'. Nick Smith (2007) believes that the most noteworthy 'confluence of Adorno and Levinas' is 'their shared conception of life as entirely instrumentalized' (2007: 27) along with their similar opinion about the violence committed through 'the subsumption of the particular to the universal motivated by the desire to master the unknown'(2007: 278). C.B. Sachs claims that Adorno and Levinas represent the attempts at 'a rethinking of ethics in the light of Auschwitz' (2011: 273). Likewise, Espen Hammer (2000) considers 'Adorno's materialistic inscription of transcendence' as being comparable to Levinas's 'transcendent infinity' because they represent 'an ethically informed response to the violence of war and totalitarianism' (2000: 76). Interestingly enough, each of these critics, had started their commentaries with brief references to the similarity of Levinas and Adorno as an introductory step to the elaboration of their differences.

The points of disparity between these two thinkers can be traced back to their understanding of certain concepts which dominated their philosophy. As an example, Alford (2002) maintains that what Levinas and Adorno set against totality are infinity and the particular, respectively. For Adorno the particular can be an object whereas for Levinas it cannot be an object but rather an idea of infinity or *infinition*. As Alford further explains, Adorno believes that 'infinity means the way in which objects overflow their concepts, the world is more diverse than any concepts can know' (2002:237). Alford contends that for Levinas, infinity implies 'timelessness', 'difference', 'an intrusion of otherness' (2002:235), as well as 'a profusion of endless possibilities' (p.236). The other important point of divergence in Levinas and Adorno's thoughts concerns their idea of the role of art. Art for Adorno should be quintessentially 'non-conceptual' which is 'particularly true of modern or "de-aestheticized" art' (Alford 2002, p.238). Basically Levinas does not have a high opinion of art. In "Reality and Its Shadow" Levinas criticizes the disengagement of art from moral and political concerns. He says that art is neither revelation nor creation. Art produces an image: 'An image does not engender a *conception,* as do scientific cognition and truth . . . . An image marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity' (p. 3; emphasis in original). In Levinas's opinion, 'Art is frozen in thinghood . . . it points to itself' (Alford 2002: 239). The point is that for Levinas art lacks the capacity for ethical engagement and therefore cannot be assigned a primary role in the discourse of ethical responsibility.

At any rate, Adorno and Levinas, in a subtle way and despite the above dissimilarities, share a deep-rooted antagonism toward totalization. While for Levinas this totalization materializes in the reduction of the other to the same, for Adorno totalization is the end-result of overcoming the fear of the unknown. Given the fact that postmodern thought is similarly intolerant of totalization and hegemonic dominance, I am intrigued to consider the possibility of subsuming this aspect of Adorno's and Levinas's philosophy under the rubric of postmodern thought. What I mean by postmodern thought is a unique definition offered by Simon During (1993) which will be explicated below.

Postmodern Thought and Its Implications

A succinct and yet accurate definition of postmodern thought which is very much instrumental in my argument has been offered by During (1993). During explains that 'postmodern thought . . . cannot be regarded as a mere expression of an underlying postmodernity', but,

> We can rather brutally, characterize postmodern thought (the phrase is useful rather than happy) as that thought which refuses to turn the Other into the Same. Thus it provides a theoretical space for what postmodernity denies: otherness. Postmodern thought also recognizes, however, that the Other can never speak for itself as the Other. One should hesitate to call a discourse which revolves around these positions either for or against postmodernity, but it is certainly not simply consonant with it (1993: 449).

During's description of postmodern thought as 'that thought which refuses to turn the Other into the Same' contains implications that will be fleshed out by drawing on both Adorno's and Levinas's ideas. In my opinion, postmodern thought has the potential to become a point of convergence where the variegated lines of thought of the two philosophers meet. To this end, my argument will be based on the following major assumption: postmodern thought denounces modern thought by revealing its totalizing, destructive and violent *modus operandi* as well as its self-concerned *modus vivendi*.

Perhaps one of the most implicit implications of the above assumption is the possibility of detecting ethical undertones in postmodern thought. This covert capacity for ethics indicates that postmodern thought believes in the impossibility of any rewardingly adequate mode of relating to the other without being conceptually, theoretically and ideologically oppressive. The corollary of the previous argument is that postmodern thought appears to have the capacity to be altruistic because it reveals the moral bankruptcy of modern intellect. By this I mean that postmodern thought originated in the desire to reconsider the veracity and effectiveness of the kind of thought that was dominant in modernity and was supposedly viewed as being at the service of humanity. However, the tragic outcome of enlightened thought prompted some thinkers to respond critically to the path modern thought had traversed. Thus, it is no surprise to see that postmodernism emerged out of pains, suffering and the plight of humanity. It is also no wonder that postmodernism for some critics represents the re-examination of the spurious claims of rationality and progress.

The writings of Adorno and Levinas in their own distinctive ways hint at the same implications. Put differently, their ideas constitute a critique of the achievements of modernity. This is why I believe that their thoughts can be placed under the banner of postmodern thought. Moved by the barbarity of Auschwitz and the carnage of the Second World War, Levinas and Adorno embarked on a diagnostic examination of the root-causes of moral degeneration and decadence.[2]

Levinas's main concern is to offer an account of philosophy from its inception in Plato, to its maturation in Heidegger, demonstrating with compelling arguments how Western thought rigorously succeeded in repressing the other. Adorno, similarly, investigated the dehumanizing trend of enlightenment and the detrimental impact of instrumental rationality.

Although their overall intellectual concerns do not show an absolutely undisputed one-to-one correspondence in terms of themes and theoretical framework, Levinas and Adorno are both acutely aware of the necessity of investigating the reasons behind the tragic fall of humanity. Thus one possible way of evaluating Adorno and Levinas is to examine their thoughts in search of a critique of the dehumanizing and totalizing inclinations lurking in Western thought. I believe that an appropriate way of addressing this issue is to look for a concept that encapsulates the aberrant behavior of this thought and the gruesome consequences it generated.

Considering the above implications I argue that a term such as 'the metaphysics of comprehension' can be employed to summarize the nature of colonial and neo-colonial mindset of the West. The expression 'metaphysics of comprehension' was introduced to postmodern scholarship by Robert Eaglestone who discussed the relation between postmodern thought and ethics by offering a reading of postmodernism which is basically non-totalizing and by default ethical. My purpose here is to demonstrate how Levinas and Adorno in their critique of Western thought shared a desire to defy 'the metaphysics of comprehension' characterized as the urge to comprehend and dominate the world. For Levinas this overpowering desire has dominated the history of philosophy. For Adorno, however, this inclination for domination and subjugation inheres in instrumental rationality which is upheld in the name of efficiency and progress. A critique of the metaphysics of comprehension is indeed founded on postmodern thought. I will explain how postmodern thought's refusal to turn the other into the same amounts to a reconsideration of the conceptual legacies of enlightenment and philosophy as the love of wisdom.

I will start with an elaboration of enlightenment which will lead us to a discussion of postmodern thought and the metaphysics of comprehension. To this end, I need to go back to the genesis of the critique of the metaphysics of comprehension. My point of departure would be the seminal work of the Frankfurt School, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This book initiates a vigorous and original diagnosis of the inevitable destructiveness of rationality, or better yet, its self-destructiveness.

Enlightenment is Totalitarian: Adorno against the Metaphysics of Comprehension

Adorno and Horkheimer finished their book when the world had experienced two horrendous world wars and had barely recovered from the shock of the heinous atrocities of concentration camps. Adorno and his colleagues in the Frankfurt School were bent on demonstrating how the enlightenment's project of disenchanting the world and releasing humanity from the fear of the unknown had sadly metamorphosed into what it had rebutted, that is, myth: 'Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization …. Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002:11). There is something mythical about both enlightenment and myth which concerns the impossibility of fundamental change: 'Such resistance to change characterizes both ancient myths of fate and modern devotion to the facts' (Zuidervaart, 2015). Seeking to demonstrate 'the self-destruction of the Enlightenment' (p.xiii), Adorno and Horkheimer set out to explain the *modus operandi* of enlightenment and its return to mythology, that is, how it ultimately became what it had intended to eradicate. The purpose of enlightenment was to de-mystify the world and nature by relying on reason as an instrumental tool. The optimistic view about the efficacy of rational and scientific thinking emboldened human beings to explore the unknown, accumulate knowledge and dominate nature: 'The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy' (Adorno, and Horkheimer, 2002: 3). Coming from a Marxist background, their argument about the consequences of enlightened rationality was not limited to a critique of capitalism but also criticized totalitarianism in its manifest or latent forms in Fascist and Capitalist societies.

Dialectic of Enlightenment provides us with a valuable critical analysis of instrumental rationality which is an integral part of today's imperialism and yesterday's colonialism as the two most dominant and prevalent *modi vivendi*

of the metaphysics of comprehension. This valuable book is premised on two assumptions: 'Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology' (p. xviii). Adorno and Horkheimer diagnosed the real cause of the recidivism of enlightenment as its aversion to truth and self-examination. Enlightenment sought to disenchant the world by going on a myth-busting rampage which paved the way for scientific knowledge. The problem was the undisputed belief in the disinterestedness of knowledge and its axiomatic objectivity. However, knowledge produced under such circumstances was self-interested and burned with the desire for domination. Knowledge was not wholeheartedly devoted to the understanding of the world, nature and the discovery of truth. As Horkheimer and Adorno explained, subjugation was the defining characteristic of this vision because 'what men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate it and the other men. That is the only aim' (2002: 4).This was a disappointing turn for those who had invested hope in the ideals of enlightenment which had promised the liberation of 'the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance and error' (Porter, 1990: 1). Instead, what came to pass was the enthrallment of humanity to a totalitarian system of thought corroborating the fact that 'enlightenment is totalitarian' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002:6).

Enlightenment has a tendency for de-mystification and reductionism which are conducive to the creation and sustenance of totalitarianism. The de-mystification of the world was defined in terms of abolishing animism and anthropomorphism. Thus, the idea of nature as a living entity disappeared. The belief in supernaturalism had to be abandoned because enlightenment could not tolerate 'multiplicity of mythical figures' which needed to be 'reduced to a single common denominator, the subject' (2002: 4). Enlightenment tended to reduce 'the multiplicity of forms . . . to position and arrangement, history to fact, things to matter' (2002: 4). The quest for absolute truth was overtaken by the desire for domination and subsumption. The mentality that promoted the existence of a single, definitive and final truth would not tolerate anything that did not match its pre-ordained schema. Thus, inconsistency and contingency were considered threats to the binarism on which modern intellect was grounded. To maintain consistency, exclusionist and reductivist procedures were required to be adopted.

The reductive discourse of enlightenment sought to create homogeneity out of heterogeneity. The exorcism of nature and the elimination of animism broke the bond that connected human beings to the animate nature. From now on the abstraction of *logo* splits the world between a monad as 'a mere reference point' and 'the mass of things and creatures in the external world' (2002: 5). The monad equipped with 'the ordering mind' and 'the lordly gaze' (2002: 6) set out to objectify and conceptualize the unknown world oblivious to the fact that the more humanity dominated and manipulated nature the more they became estranged from it and the higher the price of this estrangement would be.

The dialectical thinking that is part of Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) work manifests its working in the process of the production of concepts. Adorno and Horkheimer explained that a concept works by unifying 'the features of what it subsumes' in a dialectical gesture 'in which each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not' (2002: 11). The Enlightenment was similarly trapped in the same dialectical cycle. Its aim was to emancipate humanity from the irrational fear of nature by illuminating the supposed darkness that permeated it. However, it failed to do so because it inadvertently produced the same consequences that it had warned us about. The freedom that it had promised was indeed servitude because it entailed the domination of some human beings by others under totalitarianism and culture industry. Therefore, enlightenment was characterized by what it purportedly denounced: myth, ignorance and fear. This is why Adorno and Horkheimer spoke of dialectics in the Hegelian sense of a process in which a phenomenon, through a transitional stage created by its inner contradictions, transforms into its opposite. Thus, enlightenment returns to myth, which is what it had originally decried.

Another important point in enlightenment is the state of truth and the function of thought. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argues that enlightenment works by abstraction which involves putting a distance between the knowing subject and the object. Abstraction negates the singularity (distinctiveness) of everything through conceptualization and systematic totalization. Under the rule of abstraction, truth counts as the identification of the new entry with the pre-determined general and universal features of the whole. Mathematical calculations became the ideal tools of acquiring knowledge and implementing demystification. Mathematics strips every existing entity of its singularity even before it is encountered or analyzed: enlightenment '[i]n its pre-emptive identification of the thoroughly mathematized world with truth . . . equates thought with mathematics' (Adorno, and Horkheimer, 2002: 18).

Metaphysics of comprehension as the corner stone of Western thought reveals its will to power by reifying thought and turning it into a tool. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* lamented this objectification of thought and considered it as a direct outcome of the primary separation of subject from object realized by means of abstraction and representation. Thought and reason became apparatuses for classification through 'a rational, systematically unified method which finally *apprehends* each object' (2002: 19; emphasis added). In this way reason became a tool 'to grasp'

because it lost its capacity to 'think thinking' (2002: 19). It became an apparatus to calculate the dimensions of things with the aim of achieving optimum efficiency on the basis of the means-end logic of modern intellect. Knowledge of objects and the world paved the way for the exertion of power and the preservation of the self: 'Everything is placed in 'the functional context of self-preservation' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 22). The point is that this consuming desire can be considered unethical because it is fulfilled by eliminating 'the incommensurable' (2002: 9) and changing the different to the same (2002: 8). It is also unethical because it is the preservation of a ruling minority whose fate has been tied to the majority: 'By subordinating life in its entirety to the requirements of its preservation, the controlling minority guarantees, with its own security, the continuation of the whole' (2002: 24).

Omnivorous Philosophy: Levinas against the Metaphysics of Comprehension

The last sentence of the previous section provides me with an entry point for the discussion about an overlap that exist between *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Levinas and postmodern thought. The point of convergence that could be identified relates my argument to ethics and inter-subjectivity. The enlightened mind functions on the basis of objective thinking which by virtue of its teleological orientation tends to objectify everything that enters its field of vision. The objectifying gaze negates the singularities (distinctiveness) of the encountered other by putting it in a reductive context which controls and subsumes the individual. The other–be it nature or another human being is denied genuine recognition, singularity and autonomy because it is preceded by the conceptual system that suppress its distinctive qualities. As a result, it is not inter-subjectivity that determines our interaction with the other but a pre-existing and antecedent totality that mediates our relationship with it. For Levinas this way of relating to and with the other entails violence. Western thought, according to Levinas, is concerned with the protection of the autonomy of the subject through the absorption of otherness (Levinas 1979: 43).

What makes a comparative analysis of Levinas and Adorno possible and pertinent to postmodern thought is the way they expose and deconstruct the egocentricity of Western thought. The epistemological and ontological concerns underlying Western thought ultimately forestall the establishment of an ethical relation with the other. In this sense, ethics can be the major common ground in the triad of Levinas, Adorno and postmodern thought. As Eaglestone (2004) argues, postmodern thought is basically ethical as it disrupts the metaphysics of comprehension characterizing Western thought. Such a disruption is brought about through 'an encounter with otherness' (Eaglestone, 2004: 184). To further his argument Eaglestone draws on Levinas. Levinas explains that the relationship between the self and the other is dominated by a third term. Levinas points out that '[t]his mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term which itself is not a being; in it the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened'(Levinas, 1979: 42). The third term can be a concept or 'truth and universality' (Eaglestone, 2004: 186). Even history can be considered a third term through which the self assimilates the other into a totality that is 'cruelty and injustice' as it 'ignores the Other' (Levinas, 1979: 52). Western thought seizes, holds and grasps the other in an attempt to enhance the self's freedom, 'the freedom that is identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the Other' (Levinas, 1979:42). When translated into socio-political terms Levinas's argument can be viewed as an effective conceptual framework for criticizing Western imperialism as a reduplication of Western philosophy.

While Adorno's critique of enlightenment was centered on its internal contradictions which culminated in objectification of humanity via the de-mystification of nature, Levinas questions the trajectory of philosophy from Plato to Heidegger as the philosophy of power and ontology. The reason is that the course taken by the history of philosophy is marked by prioritizing the self over the other. Levinas detects and decries the persistence of egoism at the heart of Western philosophy which justifies the supremacy of the self. This egoism is embodied in ontological concerns which effect the assimilation of the other into the same. The comprehension of the other implies cognitive violence as it ends in totalization and the subsumption. On a social plane, this is equivalent to limiting the other to a group of rational categories which can be sexual, racial, and so on. Levinas explains the way the knowing subject turns the other into a theme or a concept through cognition. Levinas argues that 'the consciousness of an ego is *identical* in its *I think*, aiming at and embracing, or perceiving, all alterity under its thematizing gaze' (Levinas, 1987: 97; emphasis in original). Cognizing the other, empowers the self therefore 'I think' comes down to 'I can', to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality' (Levinas, 1979: 46).

To defuse this omnivorous tendency in Western thought, Levinas has to rewind philosophy in order to rewrite it from the standpoint of ethics. Levinas conceives ethical responsibility as antecedent to the modes of knowing and being (epistemology and ontology). The originality of Levinas's ideas lies in locating a new footing for the phoenix-

like rise of philosophy from the cinders of Auschwitz. Through this reconfiguration Levinas claims that ethics is first philosophy.[3] Rejecting the traditional meaning of philosophy as love of wisdom, Levinas redefines philosophy as 'wisdom of love' according to which being-for-the-other takes precedence over being-for-one (Levinas 1998: 104). It is no surprise that Levinas criticizes Western philosophy as egology (Levinas 1998: 112) because philosophy begins and ends with the self which achieves a unity by reducing the other into the same (Levinas 1998: 112).

To save the other from the ravages of Western thought, Levinas strives to illustrate the exteriority of the other to cognition. According to Levinas, ethical thought does not stem from knowledge, obligation or moral considerations. For him, ethics predates all these. It even constitutes our subjectivity. This means that our subjectivity results from subjection to the other. In other words, before we become existent we are already placed in a non-reciprocal relation of responsibility towards the other. Our very being hinges on our being responsible and responsive to the plight of the other even before it is seen or becomes an object of contemplation in our mind. Viewed this way, ethics becomes the very foundation on which truth, justice and morality are premised. The self is thus bound by ethical obligations prior to the arrival of the other as Levinas succinctly observes:

> A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself. Or more exactly, as if I had to answer for the other's death even before *being* (Levinas 1989: 83; emphasis in original).

Levinas calls this relationship ethics. Unarguably, ethics runs counter to totalization and totalizing discourses in that it recognizes and respects the otherness of the other and preempts the assimilation of it into predefined categories. Levinas also speaks of the other as infinition represented by its face.[4] The other's face is imbued with an ethical command as it has the capacity to evoke compassion and sympathy as well as demand attention without directly articulating it. The face of the other persistently calls for my responsibility. We are irrecusably responsible for the other in a face-to-face relationship before the intervention of moral, judicial or personal considerations. All such considerations entail reciprocity, calculation, and often, self-interest. However, for Levinas, the self enters an asymmetrical relationship with the other. This means that there is no reciprocity in our relation with it, therefore the fulfillment of our duties toward the other is endlessly deferred. Put differently, the self is always already late in responding to the needs of the other. Such asymmetricality creates not relation but 'relation without relation' (Levinas 1979: 79-80). For Levinas the formation of any relationship implies enclosure and is thus totalizing in essence. Our non-indifference to the other is inexhaustible because it is not basically motivated by self-interest and contractuality. This is why Levinas can be regarded as the proponent of postmodern thought which opposes metaphysics of comprehension and denounces reductive approaches. Likewise, Richard Cohen identifies Levinas's postmodernity as his surpassing 'the entire enterprise of philosophy hitherto conceived' (2001:p. 6). Cohen argues that Levinas's 'unique contribution' involves challenging 'the hegemony of knowledge' which falsely claims to be capable of 'determining worth, value or purpose' (2001: 5). Being unable to 'defend even its own priority', and trying 'to mask its indifference', knowledge, instead, 'reduces everything else to knowledge . . . thus [it] remains indifferent to the very humanity of the human' (2001: 5). As a postmodern ethical thinker, Levinas keeps reminding us of how the desire to comprehend is always fulfilled at the expense of those who are not from the system and are therefore ex-centric.[5] Finally, an important aspect of Levinas's postmodernity is related to his ethical defense of ethics 'insisting on an excellence rather than yet another truth or untruth' (Cohen, 2001: 6). Levinas avoids introducing an alternative totality and works to deconstruct the existing discourses.

Bauman, Ambivalence and Postmodern Ethics

An alternative way of studying Levinas and Adorno in a way that is both exclusive and inclusive of their differences is to investigate their formative influence on Zygmunt Bauman and the confluence of their ideas on some of his works published in the past thirty years or so.

As a sociologist, Bauman has been inspired both by Adorno and Levinas. A prolific writer, he has devoted his career to analyzing various socio-historical problems from different viewpoints including postmodernity. As a staunch critic of rationality and modern intellect, Bauman can be credited as the rightful inheritor of Adorno's concern with the dire consequences of blind adherence to rationalization. His interest in a genuine etiological study of the humanitarian crises in recent times has distinguished him as a scholar who is ethically concerned about 'the other'. In

other words, his vision is colored both by Levinasian ethical ideas and an Adornian critique of the enlightened rationality. In this final section and by way of conclusion, I would like to address the dual impact of Levinas and Adorno on Bauman.

Like his mentors, Bauman has had a firsthand experience of being positioned as 'the other'. Having been born in a non-practicing Jewish family in Poland, he was forced to leave the country and live in exile to escape racial harassment. Perhaps his Jewish background along with the personal experience of fighting in the Second World War can be considered as factors contributing to his recurrent preoccupation with the inhumane aspects of modernity including rationalization and exclusion. *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) and *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) emerged out of this concern. Not surprisingly, his attention to the fate of 'the other' grew into a full-blown intellectual commitment to pursue the issue of ethical responsibility on a general scale and in a vigorously philosophical manner in *Postmodern Ethics* (1993). In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) Bauman follows the example of Hannah Arendt and Adorno in dissecting totalitarianism and rationalization. In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) he explores the reason behind the modern intellect's intolerance of ambivalence and contingency. In this book, Bauman demonstrates how this negative quality is an intrinsic aspect of modern intellect which predisposes it to reject the unclassifiable categories such as 'the stranger'. Similarly, in his later work called *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), Bauman is keen on exposing the limitations of modern ethics. However, in this book, obviously inspired by reading Levinas, he addresses the bankruptcy of foundational and universal morality as it fails to solve the aporia of moral responsibility. It is in this book that Bauman acknowledges Levinas' contribution to his argument by clothing the latter's esoteric thought in more tangible sociological terms.

As it appears from the discussion above, a humanitarian theme runs through Bauman's recent works reflecting his affinity with Adorno and Levinas. Like them, Bauman attributes the occurrence of harrowing events of the previous century to the inherent selfishness of modern thought as well as Western philosophy, which is autocratic.

In his critique of enlightenment as the genesis of modernity, Bauman follows the example of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. His major objective is to reveal the faulty logic of rationality and to examine its self-proclaimed objectivity and flawlessness. As he became familiar with Levinas, he shifted his attention to the status of morality in modernity and postmodernity. His contribution to my argument here can be summed up in these two themes which overlap significantly with postmodern thought: (a) the critique of totalitarian thought of enlightenment and (b) the overriding significance of ethics from a postmodern perspective informed by Levinasian philosophy.

In *Modernity and Ambivalence* Bauman explicitly maintains that his argument follows Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment as his goal is to 'wrap historical and sociological flesh around the "dialectics of Enlightenment" skeleton' (1991: 17). At the same time, this book is an attempt to go beyond dialectics of enlightenment by arguing that enlightenment was 'not so much *self*-destructive, as destructive of the modern project's blind arrogance, high-handedness and legislative dreams' (1991: 17). As the title of the work suggests, the problem of ambivalence as a challenge to the boundary-drawing inclination of modern mentality constitutes the core argument of the book. Even here Bauman shows his postmodern leanings by looking at modernity with a critical eye and displaying his interest in revealing how modernity becomes a breeding ground for bias and partiality. Here Bauman is basically concerned with the way the Jews helped to bring to fore the question of ambivalence following their attempt at assimilating into modern national societies in the nineteenth century. Modernity's aspiration, as embodied in the nation-building process, was to impose a rigid and watertight categorization in order to create order and identity. What could not be fit into this grid was treated as 'the waste of modernity' (1991: 15) and a threat to the 'assimilation project—bent on exterminating ambivalence' (1991:16). It is for this reason that Bauman denounces the modus operandi of modernity which relied heavily on order-making. This reliance on the said tendencies resulted in 'the entrenchment of modern national states' and the production of institutionalized mindsets reflected 'in the legitimization of social-engineering ambitions', which for Bauman are responsible for the tragedy of the Holocaust (Bauman, 1989: xiii).

Bauman also is interested in exploring alterity and its fate in modernity. His goal is to show how modern mentality tends toward the formation of a unified whole either under the pretext of nationalist fervors (as in the case of Germany and its Jewish population) or on an order-creating whim. Such an enthusiasm for forming a totality more often than not produced consequences that were calamitous because it led to the exclusion of 'others' who could not be assimilated. For Bauman the combination of the drive for order and national identity with the employment of rational means to achieve this goal had tragic moral effects. The victims were those who could not be accommodated in the system and were undecidable. The irony is that for Bauman there is nothing innately indeterminate about 'the excluded other': it is the either/or logic of modern culture that generated this ambivalence. This is part of the thesis about the occurrence of the Holocaust which was presented by Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). This

book and *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) share thematic resemblances in terms of criticizing instrumental rationality, modern intellect's self-complacency and its intolerance of ambivalence in the historical and social context of modernity. In his next book, *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), Bauman, once again relying on ambivalence and contingency, presents a critique of modern perspective on ethics which is based on universal and foundational principles. The problem for Bauman is that this insistence on universality was completely incommensurate with the interpersonal nature of ethics. Thus in this book Bauman favors the adoption of a postmodern ethical stance where he argues that modernity suffered from delusions of grandeur as it triumphantly proclaimed the universal applicability and profitability of its ambitious schemes. 'Modernity' Bauman writes, 'had the uncanny capacity for thwarting self-examination' (1993: 3). This led to the creation of blind spots on its gross inadequacies which made modernity profess that its high-minded aspirations are ultimately realizable. Instead of examining the stability of grounds on which it had erected its ideological strongholds, modernity declared that its guidelines for morality are ultimately achievable.

Bauman's bone of contention with modernity pertains to the question of alterity and the way modern conception of ethics stipulates rules for relating to the other in a spirit of rationality. These rules prescribe procedures based on universal, foundational and functional considerations. Modernity 'under the twin banner of *universality* and *foundation*' (Bauman 1993: 8; emphasis in original) tried to resolve the ambivalent and aporetic nature of ethical situations. Bauman's goal here is to demonstrate how universalism and foundationalism erased the singularity (distinctiveness) of the other. For Bauman, 'postmodern' indicates the disbelief in or the incredulity towards the possibility of creating a water-tight ethical system that settle all moral dilemmas. Taking his cue from Levinas, Bauman renounces the tendency to integrate our relation with the other in the enclosure of systems of morality that in effect absolves us of our undeniable responsibility for the other. Thus Bauman (1993) places ethical responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the individual and argues that it is not from sociality that ethical codes are developed but rather from our unique moral responsibility:

> [B]eing *for* the Other before one can be *with* the Other—is the first reality of the self, a
> starting point rather than the product of society. It precedes all engagement with the Other,
> be it through knowledge, evaluation, suffering or doing. It has therefore no 'foundation' –
> no cause, no determining factor (1993:13; emphasis in original).

This reversal of view strongly resonates with Levinas' emphatic stress on the anteriority of the Other to the system. This stance is also corroborated by Eaglestone's characterization of postmodern thought as 'an ethical position before anything else' (2004: 182). Bauman considers postmodernism as a form of ethical perspective which is in opposition to the systematic view of morality that were formulated and perpetuated by modern thought. Eaglestone maintains that postmodernism has detected in Western thought the inclination to 'reduce everything to a system' (2004: 182). Likewise Bauman demonstrates how the desire to create and proceed in terms of systematic thinking can be deceptive and disastrous in our dealings with the other. Although both Eaglestone and Bauman are following a Levinasian lead, it is wrong to claim that Eaglestone's statement is exactly in line with Bauman's endorsement of the postmodern ethical perspective. To be more accurate, Bauman is arguing for the opportunity that postmodernity has created for us to deal with ethical issues in a new way. Postmodernity believes in the non-existence of a final rational solution in approaching the other under a perfect ethical code. The reason is that, as Bauman asserts, the clash between 'the autonomy of the individuals and the heteronomy of the rational management' is not resolvable (1993: 7). It should be reiterated that modernity had a firm belief in the final reconciliation of the two. Postmodernity is the acceptance of the irreconcilability of these categories. For postmodernity, morality is essentially ambivalent. Perhaps, it is because of this awareness of the 'essentially ambivalent condition of morality' (Bauman, 1993:10), that postmodernity has formed the bedrock of postmodern thought for refusing to integrate the other into the same. Such a refusal exposes the inevitable violence that resides in any solution founded on discourses premised on universalism and foundationalism.

Conclusion

In the absence of an actual intellectual debate between Adorno and Levinas, I had to resort to a holistic view of their philosophical visions. Only by applying a bird's-eye-view study of their philosophical trajectories, could I subsume

Adorno and Levinas under the banner of postmodern thought. I argued that Levinas and Adorno defied the tyranny of Western thought. Adorno and his cohorts in the Frankfurt School pursued a diagnostic course. Levinas, however, not only diagnosed the problem, but also sought to counter the ravages of the totalizing thought by revealing the other's transcendence and exteriority to discourses that aimed to place it in a totality. However, placing Adorno and Levinas in the context of contemporary debate about postmodernism seems facile generalization. There is no denying of that. I am fully aware of the flaws and inconsistencies of my argument. First of all, During's (1993) definition bears resemblances to Lyotard's classic definition of postmodernism as the rejection of meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984:p.xxiv). Both Levinas and Adorno seem to cling to meta-narratives such as the dialectic and the Other to oppose totalitarian thought of modernity and philosophy, respectively. Accordingly, for Adorno, art might be redeeming and offer salvation because 'art is the negative knowledge of the actual world' (Adorno, 1997:159). For Levinas, the way out is through the overwhelming attraction of the infinite other. Perhaps a better and more constructive approach could have been to start from Levinas's and Adorno's rejection of the mundane in favor of the beyond. Finally, I must acknowledge that I did not sufficiently elaborate on the complexity of the term postmodernism itself, a term which is past its prime nowadays. Perhaps, it would have been more appropriate to address the difficulty of defining postmodernism and then I could have suggested that the idiosyncrasies of During's (1993) definition may lead us to think that postmodernism was a response to the grand-narratives of modernity. As I mentioned earlier, my intention was to demonstrate how the overall structure of the thoughts of Adorno, Levinas and later Bauman correspond to a postmodern debunking of totalizing discourses which sought to offer comprehensive interpretations of life. The repudiation of such discourses, I argued, could be seen as potentially ethical because either the oppressive nature of that thought is exposed (as was the case with Levinas's philosophy and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), or the very question of ethics--in its modern conception--as another example of a totalizing discourse is laid bare (as was the case with Bauman).

Notes

[1] Department of English, Khayyam University of Mashhad, Shahid Rafiee 17, Shahid Rafiee Blvd, Shahrak Lashkar, Ghasem Abad, Mashhad, Khorasan Province, Iran. Website: www.khayyam.ac.ir, Email: teymoori58@yahoo.com and m.teimouri@khayyam.ac.ir

[2] Levinas was imprisoned in a camp near Hannover in Germany after his unit was captured by the Nazis. His wife and daughter were taken into hiding by Maurice Blanchot and saved from the Holocaust. However some of the members of this family did not survive the war. These incidents and the experience of captivity formed the basis of his later intellectual orientation in which the Shoah left an indelible trace. Adorno was more fortunate. He went into exile before it was too late.

[3] Emmanuel Levinas. "Ethics as First Philosophy." *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Sean Hand. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989: 166-190.

[4] Levinas prefers infinition to infinity because the former is consistent with his avoidance of conceptualization and the possession of being. Infinity is characterized by fixity whereas infinition implies becoming and change

[5] Alford (2004) speculates about the popularity of Levinas among postmodern thinkers and argues that 'Levinas seems to provide a way out of the postmodern version of the paradox of relativism and tolerance' by proclaiming that 'the face of the other bears the trace of God' (p. 147). This means that the other is different thus respectable. Only through such an assumption can Levinas generate a sense of freedom as heteronomy rather than autonomy 'because in serving the other I open myself to the infinite, the absolutely other' (p. 153).

References

Adorno, Theodor W., and Horkheimer, Max. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford UP.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. "Reconciliation under Duress." In: *Aesthetic and Politics* edited by Ronald Taylor, 151-176. London: Verso.

Alford, C.F. 2004. "Levinas and the Political Theory." *Political Theory*, 32(2): 146-171.

--------. 2002. "The Opposite of Totality: Levinas and the Frankfurt School." *Theory and Society*, 31(2): 229-254.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1991. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

--------. 1989. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

--------. 1993. *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cohen, Richard. 2001. *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Dews, Peter. 2008. *The Idea of Evil*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

During, Simon. 1993. "Postmodernism and Post-colonialism Today." In *Postmodernism: A Reader* edited by Thomas Docherty, 448-62. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Eaglestone, Robert. 2004. "Postmodernism and Ethics against the Metaphysics of Comprehension." In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* edited by Steve Conner, 182-195. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hammer, Espen. 2000. Adorno and Extreme Evil. *Philosophy Social Criticism*, 26(4): 75-93.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1987. "Diachrony and Representation." In *Time and the Other*, Trans. R. Cohen, 97-120. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP.

-------. 1989. "Ethics as First Philosophy." In: *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand, 166-190. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

--------. 1989. "God and Philosophy." In: *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand, 77-88. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

---------. 1998. "Philosophy, Justice, and Love." In: *Entre Nous*: *On Thinking-of-the-Other*, pp. 103-121.Translated by Michael Smith, and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia UP.

---------. 1987. "Reality and its Shadow." In: *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas*, 1-13.Translated by Alfonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

---------. 1979. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alfonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Lyotard, Jean-Franscois.1984. The Postmodern Condition. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Porter, Roy. 1990. *The Enlightenment*. London: Macmillan.

Sachs, C.B. 2011. "The Acknowledgement of Transcendence: Anti-theodicy in Adorno and Levinas." *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 37(3): 273-294.

Smith, Nick. 2007. "Adorno vs. Levinas: Evaluating Points of Contention." *Continental Philosophy Review*, 40(3): 275-306.

Zuidervaart, Lambert, 2015. "Theodor W. Adorno", *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/adorno [Accessed 20 February 2018].