

THE “LEVINASIAN I” AND THE “NIGERIAN OTHERNESS”: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON SUFFERING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper subscribes to Levinas’s theory of responsibility to reflect on hardship, suffering and preventable death in Nigeria. Levinas’s theory of responsibility makes a distinction between the I/subject and the Other. Whereas the I is the benefactor, the Other is the beneficiary that is vulnerable, weak and destitute. The theory recommends absolute, unlimited, unconditional and nonreciprocal responsibility and ends as a defense of the Other it because gives him full attention, prioritize him. Hardship, suffering and death have become endemic in Nigeria and has caused aphorism that being born in Nigeria and living in Nigeria the same as the notion of the Original Sin. For many, since Original Sin is that which man is guilty for being born human, similarly, one becomes susceptible to unwarranted hardship, useless suffering and preventable death for being a Nigerian and living in Nigeria. Hardship, suffering and death have become ‘normal’ culture partly because the leaders have almost disconnected themselves from the people whom they should serve and partly because they lack the political will to improve the conditions of the people that improve the livelihood of the masses. This paper refutes suffering and allied notions, like theodicy that justify suffering. It concludes with a reinterpretation of theodicy and a postulation of good leaders as the messiah that should prioritize the Other to ameliorate or end suffering in the land.

Keywords: Suffering, Hardship, Subject, Other, Welfare, Priority, Nigerian, theodicy.

Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas constructs an ethics of responsibility to uphold the welfare of the Other and defend him from suffering. Based on its assumptions, this ethical construct prioritizes the Other over the ego. It sets a divide between the subject/I and the Other. For the subject/I is adorned and empowered; and always possesses powers, authority, abilities, resources and serviceable disposition to the Other. The Other on the other hand is indigent, vulnerable, destitute and weak. He depends

on the subject/I for his welfare and survival. The Other is 'world apart' from the Subject. Evidently, decorated with the above virility, Levinas defends the weak Other by espousing absolute, infinite, unconditional and nonreciprocal responsibility for him from the subject/I. It is important to note that the Levinasian notion of responsibility demanded of the subject is not what concerns the subject as his private or personal obligation. It is not what he is guilty of. Thus, it is a responsibility which is not his responsibility (Levinas, 1985, p. 95). The theory of responsibility ends as a defense of the Other because, besides giving full attention to him, it also arrogate on him a priority attention as well as avoiding reciprocity from the Other. In reflecting on the hardship, suffering and death in Nigeria, this paper seeks to make sense of this reflection using the Levinas's theory of responsibility.

Hardship, suffering and death have become pandemic in Nigeria. This is responsible for the banal aphorism and cliché that considers being a Nigerian and living in Nigeria same as the notion of the Original Sin. For many, since Original Sin is that which man is guilty for being born human, *simili modo*, one becomes susceptible to unwarranted hardship, useless suffering and preventable death for being a Nigerian and living in Nigeria. Hardship, suffering and death has become a usual condition, a culture in Nigeria partly because the leaders have almost disconnected themselves from the people whom they are supposed to serve and partly because they lack the political will to end this evil by improving the conditions that positively impact the livelihood of the masses.

This paper subscribes to the Levinasian notion of the I/subject and the Other. It equiparates the I/subjects with all leaders, public officers and the wealthy class and the Others with the poor and suffering masses. It makes a case for the suffering masses by defending them and taking a swipe on the leaders at all levels arguing that leaders are servants and ought to prioritize the masses in their services and pay attention to them as an obligation. It further argues that since the Levinasian notion of responsibility of the subject is about what does not even matter to him or concerns him, therefore leaders who are entrusted with the welfare of the people as their primary duty ought to cater for the wellbeing of the people and ought not justify the unwarranted hardship, useless suffering and preventable death that has overtaken the country given the abundant human and natural resources. Therefore, like Levinas, the paper rejects any attempt to use theodicy to justify the hardship, suffering and deaths. Thus, it deconstructs theodicy and seeks

its re-interpretation, but it claims that explaining the suffering in Nigeria with the notion of theodicy may be meaningful.

Suffering according to Levinas is a consciousness of pains, discomforts, cries, moan and “the least one can say about suffering is that, in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless: “for nothing”” (Levinas, 1998, p. 93). The uselessness of suffering can neither be supported nor be allowed to continue. It is because of suffering that Levinas decries “it is this attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelty of our century can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle” (ibid., p. 94). This supreme ethical principle consists in rejecting hardship, suffering and death; deconstructing theodicy that is maliciously used to justify oppression on the masses. Furthermore, it consists in prioritizing the Others – the masses over the I/subject – leaders, public officers and the wealthy class. This paper proceeds in four steps after the introduction. The second section makes a brief introduction of Emmanuel Levinas and his notion of the I (subject), which this essay likens to the leaders, public officers and the wealthy of the society. The wealthy must prioritize the Others to reduce (and possibly end) unwarranted hardship, useless suffering and preventable death in Nigeria. The third section explains the notion of the Other. It views the poor masses as the Others and further explores some instances where malgovernance causes unwarranted hardship, useless suffering and preventable death. The fourth section explores the aphorism which equates being a Nigerian with the theological notion of the Original Sin and justifies it with the notion of theodicy. Thus, it rejects theodicy as a justification of hardship, suffering and death in Nigeria. The fifth section concludes with the notion of ethical priority of the Other as a new way of defending the Otherness. It concludes that the I/subject ought to be the messiah for the Other.

The Levinasian I/subject: Notion and meaning

Emmanuel Levinas was born on 12th January 1906, in Kaunas, Lithuania. He had his secondary school education in Lithuania and Russia (Levinas, 1985, p. viii). In the wake of the World war 1, in 1914, Levinas’s family emigrated to Karkhov, in the Ukraine and returned two years after the war to Lithuania in 1920. In 1923, Levinas studies philosophy along with Maurice Pradines, psychology with Charles Blondel and sociology with Maurice Halbwachs in Strasbourg, France. However, he, meets Maurice Blanchot and becomes a close friend. Between 1928 and 1929 Levinas studies with Edmund Husserl and was opportune to attend

seminar of Martin Heidegger. At the completion of his studies Levinas publishes his thesis *La theorie de l'intuition dans la phenomenology de Husserl* [*The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's phenomenology*] (Levinas, S.E.P. 2006, p. 2). Levinas worked as a professor of philosophy, director of the Oriental Israelite Normal School and professor in the University of Poitiers in 1964. In 1967, he worked as a professor in the University of Paris-Nanterre and in 1973, at the Sorbonne University (Levinas, 1985, p. viii). Levinas continues with scholarly work on philosophy till about 1993. His intellectual work aims at developing a first philosophy which for him is ethics. Whereas either metaphysics, theology or ontology is first philosophy in Western philosophy, Levinas has it otherwise. For him, it is ethics, and this is his philosophical preoccupation. Levinas has several publications including *Totalite et infini: essai sur l'exteriorite* [*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*] in 1961 and *Autrement qu'etre ou au- dela de l'essence* [*Otherwise than Being or Beyond essence*], his first and second great works respectively (Levinas S.E.P., 2006, pp.2-3).

In Levinas theory of responsibility, the "I" and the "subject" are interchangeable. His ethics of responsibility prescribes absolute, unlimited, unconditional and non-reciprocal responsibility for the Other by the I/subject (Levinas, 1969, 215; 1974, p. 215). The I is opposed to the Other, because while the I is the benefactor of the responsibility, the Other is the beneficiary. The subject on the other hand, is the I that always responds, provides, cares for and takes responsibility for the Other. Levinas claims that the subject must respond to the Other himself because he (the subject) is the only one available to assume the responsibility which is untransferable (Levinas, 1985, p. 100). The I must respond to the Other by himself and should not be deterred by challenges he encounters. The challenging terms of responsibility ascribed on the I is responsibility is absolute. Levinas therefore, defines the subject/I as "answering for everything for everyone" (Levinas, 1974, p. 114). This definition shows answerability as a form of responsibility which is a duty of the subject on behalf of the Other. Thus, one understands that against other conceptions of the self as egoistic, the Levinasian notion of the I, subject or self is altruistic which he thus express: "Responsibility for the others has not been a return but to oneself, but an exasperated contracting which the limit of identity cannot retain" (ibid.). The I in Levinasian ethical construct must be understood as 'for the Others' because he exists for the Others. This analysis makes sense of Levinas's claims of the origin of the relationship between the I and the Other which he claims that "the relationship with the non-ego, precedes any relationship of the ego with itself. The relationship with the other precedes the auto-affection of

certainty" (Ibid., p. 119). This is why Levinas also construes the I as transcending and communicating because he is always tending toward others, a claim which agrees with one of the existentialists conception of man as self-transcending. Therefore, in his transcendence, the I immerses himself as well as responds to the call of its nature which is responding to the Other. Levinas qualifies responsibility as, absolute, asymmetrical, infinite and unconditional. How is the subject able to fulfill this arduous responsibility?

The Levinasian I is a *superman* and he characterizes him with superlative features. In his construct, he is always present, ready and always endowed with the resources and the means with which to respond to the Other's needs. He has at all times the practical responses and the necessary things to take care of the Other. As the definition of the I above entails, the I must respond the essential destitution of the Other because it is natural for him to do so. These endowments are postulated to make it possible for the subject to live up to his postulated nature. It is understood that one cannot always fit into this description, therefore, the construct aims to bear out his responsibility ethics.

Furthermore, in constructing his ethical system, an asymmetry unfolds between the two postulated divides, the I and the Other. The Other who approaches from the dimension of height is the weaker person that seeks attention of the I (Levinas, 1969, p. 34). The height in turn designates the circumstantial differences between the I and the Other. The differences in their situations create the asymmetry and hence, non-reciprocity. This informs that the Other is indigent and incapable to reciprocate the attention of the I, and the subject should, however, not expect. On this, Levinas argues that the asymmetrical responsibility defines the subject - Other relationship "the intersubjective relation is non-asymmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity" (Levinas, 1985, p. 98). The introduction of asymmetry between the I and the Other, I think, is certainly the crux of the defense of the Other. This is because no viable human relationship is unilateral. Therefore, it is obvious that the absoluteness, the unconditionality and the infinity, that define the Levinasian responsibility culminates in this asymmetry and so indicates the defense of the Other. Again, non-reciprocal relationship characterizes subjectivity which Levinas extols as ethical. For him, the Other is frail and needy and our ability to respond to the Other's need is ethical. Elsewhere, Levinas emphasizes responsibility as asymmetry to underscore the morality of responsibility "my position as I consist in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other" (Levinas, 1969,

p. 215). Absolute and unconditional, infinite and asymmetrical responsibility for the Other are essential ingredients of Levinas's ethics justifies that "since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regards; his responsibility is *incumbent on me*.... I am responsible for his very responsibility" (Levinas, 1985, p. 96). For the subject, this notion of responsibility entails selflessness as well as upholds human dignity and welfare, care, peaceful co-existence and friendship. Who then are the Levinasian I? They are the Political leaders, the public officers, Leaders at all levels and the wealthy class and all who can help the poor. They are the wealthy Nigerian whether in public or in the private sectors. They are the wealthy industrialist and businessmen. They are the employers of labor. They are the decision makers. Those upon whom the common and vulnerable masses, the destitute, the hungry, the homeless, the jobless mass, the orphans and widows depend. They are obligated to feed the masses with the bread from one's mouth and be clothed with the coat from the one's shoulders (Levinas, 1974, p. 55).

The Nigerian Others: Conceptual explication and deplorable experience

The Nigerian Others are the masses. Like in the Levinasian Otherness, the Nigerian Otherness are the vulnerable, the destitute, all that need help to survive. The Others in Levinas's construct enjoy his defense because they are the weak and incapacitated. For example, Levinas explicitly vouches for the strongest support and care for them when he avers "for the other despite oneself, starting with oneself, the pain of labor in the patience of aging in the duty to give to the other even the bread out of one's mouth and the coat from one's shoulders" (Levinas, 1974, p. 55). This destitution picturing the hunger, nudity, homelessness, insecurity etc. calls for compassion and it is the persons in this classes that Levinas's ethics of responsibility defends. The Levinasian Other is a symbol of lack and privation and always needing help. He suffers pains and only hopes to be relieved by the Subject. Levinas characterizes the sordid condition of the Other as follows "the exposedness to other is physical pain itself that I can be exploited" (Levinas, 1974, p. 55). Elsewhere, he characterizes the contact with the Other as feeding him at his own self expense as if he is fasting (*ibid.*, p. 56). The image of the Levinasian Other is not estimable, but Levinas deepened the characterization further as he views the Other as "a self-uncovered, exposed and suffering in its skin. In its skin, it is stocked in its skin, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability, pain is not simply a *symptom* of a frustrated will, its meaning is not adventitious.

The painfulness of pain, the malady or malignity or illness (*mal*), and, in the pure state the very patience of corporeality, the pain of labor and aging are aversity itself the against oneself that is in the self" (ibid., p.51). Although the Other cannot always be so characterized, this imagery invariably offers us the idea of the condition of the Levinasian Other. It is obvious that Levinas's characterization of the Other is hypothetical aiming to bear out and defend his responsibility ethics. The Levinasian Other parallels the Nigerian Others. The construct of the Other is both an experiential and intellectual speculation, but the Nigerian Otherness is real and concrete human condition. Thus, the narrative is based on experience, facts and figures.

Recently, Nigeria was recognized by the comity of nations as the poverty capital of the world. Being so does not mean the lack of resources or impossibility to attain national prosperity, but disproportionate distribution of the national wealth, poor economic policies, poor management and corruption etc. have placed Nigerians at unequal and a disadvantaged position. The Oxford Committee for Famine relief (OXFAM) International observes that "economic inequality in Nigeria has reached extreme levels, despite being the largest economy in Africa. The country has an expanding economy with abundant human and the capital potential to lift millions out of poverty" (<https://www.oxfam.org/en/nigeria-extreme-inequality-numbers>). A cogent question here is why this reality of inequality, poverty and suffering? An immediate Levinasian response, however, is the lack of responsibility of the I's toward the Others. This response shall be explained later on in this essay, but before then, let this claim be investigated. A "what" and a "how" question could further assist this investigation. A "what" question investigates the factors favoring this oddity, whereas a "how" question examines the extent of the inequality, thus, showing the range, or the poverty gap between the I's and the Others. These two questions are however, conjoined is taken simultaneously.

The OXFAM statistics regarding the "what" question, scrutinizes the factors promoting inequality. It claims that the wealthiest Nigerian with his annual earnings can lift two million people out of poverty annually. It further claims that rural women representing between 60 to 70% work force, are most likely to be hired workers without their own farmlands therefore depend solely on their hirers for their daily wages. To worsen the situation, about 94% of these rural women being illiterate have no prospect of better job opportunities if ever available. (ibid). Often, such hopes for job opportunities are elusive, and this opens up and widen

the rich - poor gap in the country. Furthermore, the same report has it that “between 1960 and 2005, about \$20 trillion was stolen from the public treasury by public officers. This amount is larger than the GDP of the United States in 2012 (about \$18 trillion)” (ibid.). Hitting the nail in the head, the report declares that abject poverty and inequality in Nigeria is artificial because it is not caused by lack of resources rather, ill-use, misallocation and misappropriation of funds. Furthermore, at the root of this problem is a culture of corruption combined with the disconnection between the political elites and the poor masses in struggles, sufferings and the destitution of their daily live. In what follows, the report factors out Nigeria’s priorities in terms of annual budgetary allocations where certain vital sectors receive very low funds allocations. It queries for example, the 6.5% allocation for education and 3.5% for health in 2015 (ibid.). These allocations could be said to degenerate the education and the health sectors as the outcomes of such poor allocations and its implication to wellbeing are obvious – degenerating human conditions.

A brief highlight of the Nigerian situation will clarify and drive home the emphasis. Having established the Nigerian Others as the poor masses, on the basis of the OXFAM report, the following factors could be held responsible for the poverty and suffering the Nigerian Others: 1) Insufficient attention on the part of wealthy Nigerians. 2) Insufficient cash flow between the rich and the poor. 3) Illiteracy. 4) Lack of job opportunities. 5) Embezzlement of public funds and investing or hoarding the funds in foreign lands. 6) Disconnection between the political elites and the masses etc. The above highlights offer insight into the Nigerian poverty situation and the *raison d’être* for her branded name as the poverty capital of the world. Furthermore, stepping into the actual experience of the “Nigerian Others” is more enlightening.

The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reports the poverty and inequality level in Nigeria. It indicates that between the period of September 2018 and October 2019, forty percent of people or 82.9 million earn N137,430 (€322) per annum. This statistic applies to the Northern Nigeria, particularly Sokoto state. The commission notes that most rural dwellers populating over 50% live in poverty whereas a few urban settlers about 18% have access to job opportunities. Whereas Sokoto state recorded the highest poverty level of 87.7%, Lagos recorded 4.5% (<http://www.rfi.fr/en/africa20200504-forty-percent-of-nigerians-live-below-poverty-line-statistic-office-coronavirus>). Despite the high poverty rate, the population growth increases with increasing poverty. This signals a bleak future

unless the situation is arrested and put under control. Overpopulation is an added problem, yet the government is complacent about it.

Similarly, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) mission indicates a bleak future for Nigeria. Contrary to its proposal to end poverty in Nigeria in 2030, it foresees the proposal as impossible noting that, "the World Poverty Clock accordingly shows Nigeria has overtaken India with the most extreme poor people in the world" (<https://qz.com/africa13133380/nigeriaa-has-the-highest-rate-of-extreme-poverty-globally/>). It is supposed that the failure of Nigeria to bring out her citizen from extreme poverty is an indictment on the country's political leaders. The statistics that shows 86.9 million Nigerian living under abject poverty is almost 50% of her projected 180 million population (ibid.). Based on this statistic, the future is not promising, therefore, something must be done. However, that Nigeria is acclaimed Africa's most populous nation and the fastest growing economy gives reasons for concern. In what follows, the extreme poverty condition has dealt serious blows on the masses that can succinctly be summarized

Civilians have limited access to assistance, and food remains a major need in displacement settlements. Prolonged absence of food security, livelihoods, healthcare, education, clean water, and sanitation and hygiene facilities exacerbate risks. Protection concerns include arbitrary detention, forced conscription, domestic violence, forced and early marriages, trafficking, and sexual exploitation and abuse (Nigeria/Hunger Relief in Africa/Action Against Hunger <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/countries/africa/ngeria>).

On their own, the masses can do only little to salvage their conditions if environment is conducive. The wealthy - poverty divide invariably polarizes Nigerian *Is* and the Others. As such, all in the block responsible for, or perpetrating the inequality in favor of the wealthy are the Nigerian *Is* whereas the masses in their sufferings, hunger, destitution joblessness etc. are the Others. Back to inequality, suffering, hunger, joblessness, embezzlement of public funds by public office holders, investing or hoarding of Nigeria's public funds in foreign countries at the expense and suffering of the Nigerian Others. Massive embezzlement is banal in Nigeria. For example "Sobomabo Jackrich has alleged embezzlement of N6.2billion by the Interim Management Committee under the guise of palliatives distribution" (TVC News). This sum was approved by president Buhari for the

procurement and distribution of COVID-19 relief for the nine states of the Niger delta region. Furthermore, "The Nigerian Senate on Tuesday 5th May 2020 constituted a probe Committee that would investigate alleged embezzlement of over N40 billion by the Interim Management Committee (IMC) of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)" (Usman, 2020). President Buhari's action of setting up an IMC and the forensic audit aimed at forestalling the financial recklessness of the commission, repositioning it and fast-tracking the development of the region. The IMC has been more bedeviled with the same financial misuse, misapplication, misappropriation or outright fraud in the management of the funds of the commission. (ibid). The Nigeria's story of financial crimes are innumerable and derogatory. An immediate response to this manner of corruption is ignorance and insensitivity to the plight of the Others. The negligence of government and the corruption of public officers result in underdevelopment, unwarranted hardship, useless suffering and preventable death of the masses. This condition likens living in Nigeria and being a Nigerian to the Original Sin at the beck of theodicy for explanation and justification. Are these justifiable?

Being a Nigerian, a case of Original sin? Refuting theodicy

There is an affinity between the doctrine of Original sin and being a Nigerian. In Christianity, one becomes guilty of Original Sin by being born in the human nature. It is a contracted not a committed sin. As a Christian (Catholic), there is no escape from it otherwise, one will have to escape his human nature (if that is possible). Therefore, the Original sin is blotted out by the Sacrament of Baptism. Because of hardship, suffering and death, being born in Nigeria is likened to the notion of the Original Sin. Suffering in Nigeria seems eternal, the future appears bleak and 'yet to come' and the hope of better life elusive. Unlike the Original Sin that salvation came through Christ, where is the way out of the suffering of being born a Nigerian? It was of this predicament, that the popular Nigerian Afro musician, Fela Anikokputi sang in one of his albums entitled "suffering and smiling." When this music was first released, little was known of hardship as it is presently. Contemporarily, Nigerians have come to live with the reality of sufferings. It has become the 'usual' way of life. Suffering in Nigeria could be described as pandemic and is caused by maladministration in its various forms.

Maladministration is caused by several variables including the incompetence of the government (poor and unrealizable policies, lack of foresight, etc.), disconnection from the people, neo enslavement of the people etc. This invariably

results in endemic corruption among government officials and public officers and turns out in administrative vices and stunted developments which are indicative in embezzlement of public funds, lack of amenities, dysfunctional institutions, insecurity, banditry and criminality. While on the one hand, the failure of the government in her responsibilities to her citizenry has occasioned hardship and suffering, the dysfunctional institutions and agencies have 'reinforced' criminalities, thus, the ordinary citizens bear the brunt of government's maladministration. There have always been attempted demonstrations, protests, strike actions etc. to call governments to live up to her responsibilities. One of such efforts was the August 6, 2019 protest tagged "#RevolutionNow#" in which the organizers called the government's attention to malgovernance, and after a year, the group continues to protest the "growing insecurity, poverty, hardship, hunger, blood let and avoidable loss of lives and properties in the country" (Vanguard news). On August 5, 2020 the group tagged the demonstration as "national day of action" and the protest took place simultaneously in all the major cities of Nigeria including Abuja and Lagos. From the protest, the citizens demand better governance from president Buhari (Vanguard news, 2020). This protest must be understood as the peak of the demonstration to express that the citizens could no longer bear the harsh socio-economic reality in Nigeria. The different inscriptions on the placard of the protesters translate the previously highlighted ills and failures of the current administration. For the Original Sin, Jesus Christ came as the Redeemer, but the Nigerian pandemic maladministration is without a savior, hence, a messiah is needed. The suffering of Nigerians is unacceptable, unjustifiable and undefendable though theodicy may explain it.

Theodicy is a coinage from two Greek words *Theos* (god) and *dike*, (justice), literally meaning justifying God. It explains why God in His goodness and perfection allows evil in the world. Theodicies are the philosophical and theological responses to the problem of evil. Christian theology follows two approaches to explaining theodicy: St. Augustine (354-430) and St. Irenaeus (c.120/140-c. 200/203) approaches (Theodicy-Britannica Online Encyclopedia). The Augustinian approach rests on and emphasizes the impact of the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and considers all evils as consequence of the fall. For example, for natural evil such as disease and physical catastrophes, moral evil such as man's inhumanity to man, supernatural evil- as in the effects of supernatural forces like Satan and demons, St Augustine claims that all these evils befall man as consequences of the fall of Adam and Eve (ibid.). For St. Augustine,

evil is a punishment for sin or a consequence of the disturbance of natural order. Furthermore, St. Irenaeus understands the fall as a lapse caused by human frailty and immaturity. He, however, introduces a glimpse of hope by construing the fall not as a catastrophe but as an event that offers humanity the opportunity to learn for the future. He claims that the world is a mix of good and evil, therefore, it provides humanity an environment to grow and develop toward the perfection for which God created him. (ibid.) The two approaches agree that freedom of the human will is the point at which evil enter into the world, “because freewill is good, both in itself and because it enables individual to take responsibility for their own actions, God permits sin (moral evil) as the price of freedom” (ibid.). While these approaches uphold freewill and assert human responsibility, and while theodicy can attempt to explain the Nigerian situation, it does not justify the suffering of Nigerians. Before refuting and rejecting theodicy, some light must be shed on Levinasian conception of suffering.

Suffering is a painful reality in human existence. This experience is excruciating in the Nigerian situation. It is partly because suffering is alien to human nature, and little has been done to alleviate or end it. Suffering results from hardship and it stares on the faces of majority of Nigerians. Levinas describes suffering as “a *datum* in consciousness, a certain “psychological content” similar to a lived experience of color, sound, contact or any other sensation” (Levinas, 1998, p. 91). Locating in the human consciousness as a datum, suffering is destructive to the human person and his capabilities because he feels it, lives it and becomes affected by it. Because of its painful effects, suffering is abhorred by humans. Suffering has both physical and psychological dimension on the person, “the passivity of suffering, in its pure phenomenology, abstracting from its psychophysical and psychophysiological conditions is not the other side of any activity as it would be effect corelative to its cause” (ibid., p. 92). Suffering creates negative impacts that stare him on the face. Furthermore, suffering is undesirable, “in suffering, sensibility is vulnerability, more passive than receptivity, an encounter more passive than experience. It is precisely an evil. It is not, to tell the truth, through passivity that evil is described, but through evil that suffering is understood” (ibid., p. 92). Suffering has strong affinity with evil hence, suffering is a consequence of evil. This intuition agrees with Augustinian explication of suffering as a consequence of Original sin. It is Levinas’s conviction that all evil committed relates back to suffering, which is to say that evil and suffering follows the principle of cause and effects, where evil is the cause and suffering, the effect. Furthermore, suffering is based on individuals’

experience, "is not the evil of suffering – extreme passivity, helplessness, abandonment and solitude – also the unassumable, whence the possibility of a half opening that a moan, a cry for aid, for curative help from the other me whose alterity whose exteriority promises salvation" (ibid., p. 93)? To the Other, the experience and effects of suffering are undesirable. It is because of this that the Other seeks the help of the subject.

For the Other, suffering is useless because it lacks reasons and meaning. Therefore, Levinas refutes and rejects theodicy because it justifies the suffering of the Other. He queried: "The very phenomenon of suffering in its uselessness is, in principle, the pain of the other. For an ethical sensibility, confirming in the inhumanity of our time, its opposition to this inhumanity, the justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality" (ibid., p. 98). Theodicy implies justifying evil as Divine justice without succor for the pain of the suffering Other. For this reason, Levinas vehemently rejects theodicy for seeking to arrogate justification of evil on God and considering the defense as Divine justice.

Levinas is Augustinian in thinking theodicy. He agrees with the existence of evil in the world and suffering as a punishment for evil. Levinas is not oblivious of the perfection of God and of his creation. He asserts this harmony by stating, "this kingdom of transcendent end, willed by a benevolent wisdom, by the absolute goodness of God who is in a sense defined by that supernatural goodness; or a goodness invisibly disseminated in Nature and History, whose paths, indeed painful but leading to good, benevolent wisdom will direct" (ibid., p. 99). Levinas also agrees that the freedom of the human will introduced sin in the world. He acknowledges the notion of Original sin in accord with Judaism and Christianity but protests that "beyond the fundamental malignity of suffering itself, revealed in its phenomenology, does not human experience in history attest to a wickedness and an ill will" (ibid., p. 96)? It appears that Levinas's also subscribes to the Irenaean approach to theodicy that promises a better future in lieu of the hope that humanity can learn from history and take correction because evil is not an utter catastrophe. With this protest, Levinas takes on a critique of theodicy and submits: "Certainly, one may inquire into whether theodicy, in the broad and narrow senses of the term, effectively succeeds in making God innocent or in saving morality in the name of faith or in making suffering bearable, or into the true intent of the thought that has recourse to theodicy" (ibid., p.96). It could be argued that Levinas rejects theodicy as meaningless because of goodness that characterizes the nature of God, the demands of ethics and religion. Being Omnipotent, Omniscient,

Omnipresent and benevolent, how can the all good and perfect God be responsible of the evils in the world? Since God is the creator of all, how can He also be absolved of the evils in the world? How can we defend that God delights in the suffering of the creatures He created out of love? Shall we explain these evils with the deist theory of the enlightenment that God is not in charge of the world? Though the problem of evil is one of the philosophical issues, the conception of evil as a negation of the good and lacking in substance is not just a sufficient explanation. Therefore, Levinas climaxed his critique, "if God was absent in the concentration camps, the devil was very obviously present" (ibid., p. 99). How can this be understood: That God lacks the qualities with which we describe Him? That God is also responsible for evil? A safer take is to assume that God allows man to choose and decide his actions. Concentration camps must not just be understood literally. Though it was a concrete place, it could also be applied to situations of extreme hardship, suffering and mass death of innocent and vulnerable people. It is in this context one could liken the concentration camp to the suffering and death of thousands of Nigerians because of the effects of malgovernance and other avoidable causes. This suffering cannot be justified. Theodicy might explain but could certainly not justify it. Following the Augustinian approach, one could assume that the suffering, the hardship and the innumerable death toll in Nigeria are firstly, punishment for the choice of bad leaders and public servants. Secondly, due to human inclination to doing evil following his evil Will. On the Irenaean perspective, one could understand the suffering as a situation to learn from to better the future. The hope of change in the future, makes it not a catastrophe. Whichever interpretation one upholds, does not justify the suffering, hardship and mass death tolls in Nigeria. As Levinas refuted theodicy in connection to the situation of the millions of Jews that were exterminated at the concentration camp, same deconstruction applies because of thousands of Nigerians that have been subjected to all sorts of hardship, suffering and death that parallel the holocaust in their *patria*. Sad enough, most Nigeria leaders at all levels of government are either partly or completely disconnected from the people and their plight. At this juncture, the gracious words of Epicurus resounds: "empty are the words of that philosopher who offers no therapy for human suffering. For just as there is no use in medical expertise if it does not give therapy for bodily diseases, so there is no use in philosophy if it does not expel the suffering of the soul." (Long & Sedley, 1987, p. 155). Levinas's philosophy at this juncture has proved to be a plausible and compelling response to human welfare. The lack of justification of the suffering of the Other compelled Levinas to search

for a new approach to ethics. This is in keeping with his philosophy that is homocentric and his ethics, a defense of the alterity.

Conclusion: ethical Priority of the Nigerian Other, the messiah

Levinasian ethics is messianic because it proposes and espouses the wellbeing of the Other by prioritizing him. Philosophically, Levinasian ethical reflections are forerunner of messianism and Levinas, a Messianic philosopher. The culmination of his messianic ethical proposition is finding of the new way of responding to the hardship and suffering of the Other after deconstructing theodicy. This new way hangs on the ethical priority of the Other. The priority of the Other is a major preoccupation of Levinas's ethics where his defense alterity in his theory of responsibility is absolute, infinite, unconditional and nonreciprocal. This construct defends the Other from being neglected as well as from any form of reciprocity. Whereas the Other is pictured as indigent, vulnerable, destitute etc. as reasons for compassion and hospitality toward him, the I/ subject is viewed as virile subject with all that is needed to respond to the needs of the Other. This construct is certainly an assumption to bear out Levinas's responsibility theory. It is for this reason that he submits, "the word *I* means *here I am* answering for everything and for everyone" (Levinas, 1974, p. 114). Further, Levinas strongly claims that taking responsibility for the Other is founded in the nature of the subject/I as he states, "responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject but precedes essence in it" (ibid.). Given this analysis, one cannot but think Levinas's ethics of responsibility as a prioritization of the Other, thus, construing it as messianism. For prioritizing the Other to oneself is in opposition to some other philosophical notion of the self. For example, Hobbes thinks man as a wolf to his fellow man whereas Freud considering the neighbor as a field of contestation proposes aggression to ward him off and to secure his property. It is absolutely true that these and their likes would not subscribe to Levinas's responsibility ethics. To drive his argument more stunning Levinas defends that relationship and responsibility with Others precedes that of oneself. He avers "in expiation, the responsibility for the others, the relationship with the non-ego, precedes any relationship of the ego with itself" (ibid., p. 119). This avowal sturdily justifies my claim of Levinas's priority of the Other to oneself that is the I or the subject. It has been the claim of this paper that Levinas's priority of the Other is messianic, for the I/subject is the messiah of the Other. To ease and end the suffering and hardship of the Other, theodicy is deconstructed whereas responsibility is postulated as the messiah.

Levinas's refutation of theodicy has some implications for evil and human suffering and the vision of the two perspectives of theodicy. We can surmise the following from Levinas's refutation of theodicy: Firstly, the ontology of evil and its unjustifiability. Secondly, 'irrational' responsibility to the vulnerable and the suffering Others as the core of ethics. Thirdly, re- interpreting theodicy based of the two perspectives, electing good leaders as the messiah to the Other as well as the wealthy class willing the welfare of the poor masses. Doing this entails a return to the notion of the Original sin (being born as a Nigerian) which has its stronghold on human freedom of the will. This paper construes evil as moral evil - man's inhumanity to man.

Ontologically, evil and suffering have close affinity but also, they are abhorrent to human happiness and fulfilment. The constant conjunction between evil and suffering is such that the banality of evil is followed by the corresponding hardship and sufferings. In this take, the evil that leads to human suffering is absolutely unjustifiable in Levinas's ethics. For, the care of the Other excludes pains, hardship, sufferings and ultimately death. In contrast to suffering, responsibility upholds care, pleasure, happiness and the enjoyment of the elementals. In suffering, the Other is weighed down and overcome by the burden of his being. Suffering robs the Other of self fulfilment while being held down by the burden of his being. It also impedes the possibility of I to respond to the Other and the other Others in their predicaments. The constant conjunction between evil and suffering and the consequent impeding of responsibility calls for all subjects to show the Others goodness beyond being. For, the suffering, hardship and death of the citizenry is useless suffering which Levinas refutes and describes as end of theodicy. Useless suffering caused by disoriented humans could never be justified though theodicy can explain it. Thus, theodicy is ended while human welfare is upheld through responsibility.

Levinas's refutation of theodicy implies a refutation of rational speculation of human suffering. 'Irrational responsibility' which parallels Levinas's notion of responsibility as nonreciprocal, indeed a responsibility for what is not my concern, for what does not matter to me is invoked (Levinas, 1985, p. 95). For, it is this irrational responsibility that answers the new way of human relations, ethics, and moral life. The consciousness of this new way will re-orientate the Nigerian leaders at all level that they should prioritize the suffering Other. Thus, if Levinas demands this manner of responsibility from a 'private' individual, one is left to think out what he expects from leaders, those on authority and public officers who

have direct responsibility of the people, who were elected for the sake of rendering services for the masses. It is for this reason that this paper strongly rejects theodicy as a theory that seeks to justify hardship and suffering of which Nigerians are consumed. Leaders should not serve themselves, but the people as a duty. They should take the people's plight, suggestions, vision, welfare into consideration in governance policies. This argument coheres with Edelglass who notes that the consequence of Levinas's deconstruction of theodicy and the rejection of suffering for Others paves way for propounding a solution (2006, p. 41.). Responsibility ethics is incompatible with any justification of human suffering. Contrary to creating evils that inflict pains, hates and other vices, it is a plausible idea in Levinas that human suffering gives the subject the compulsion to absolutely respond to the Other as a mark of compassion and care. Levinasian vision of ethics answers this response in a variety of ways; caring, attention, provision for, acknowledging vulnerability and absolutely saving and enhancing life by ending hardship and suffering.

Finally, a re-interpretation of theodicy is a *sine qua non*. Philosophical and theological speculation of theodicy has the Original sin as its point of departure. Whereas the Augustinian approach views it as a catastrophe and punishment, the Irenaean approach views it as an act of frailty and hopes for correction and a change of narrative. While Nigerians may understand the hardship, suffering and death in the land as punishment for electing incapable leaders based on the Augustinian approach, the hope offered by the Irenaean perspective is consoling. In the theological exegesis of the two approaches, a Messiah was promised, and He actually redeemed humanity from the punishment of the sin and strengthened humanity of its frailty. However, in the Nigerian context, the 'messiah' personifies good leaders at all levels of governments. On the Irenaean approach Nigerians must learn to elect good leaders henceforth, leaders who are sensitive to the hardship and suffering of the populace. The leaders must consider themselves as servants of the people thereby prioritizing the people to their egoistic interests. They must also be aware of the social implications of the freedom of their Wills and therefore, avoid creating problem, suffering and hardship for others by illicit exercise of such freedom. This new consciousness can show a priority to the Nigerian Other and alleviate suffering in the land.

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