



Care Ethics as First Philosophy: Responding Bill Gates through Emanuel Levinas lenses Over Covid-19 Vaccine Imperialism

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Abstract:

In a recent interview of British news broadcaster Sky News, well-known billionaire and philanthropic humanist Bill Gates was seriously asked if it would be good to share intellectual property rights of Covid-19 vaccines with developing countries. To this question, which is a very vulnerable matter in the present time when millions of people have been looking with an owing attitude to developed countries, Bill Gates boldly claimed big no-no. Now with this negation, intellectuals have been shifted into two categories: on the one hand, some have been affirming bill gates attitude with nationalistic, capitalistic and intellectual rightist justifications; while on the other hand, some are condemning him with an approach that it refutes the very possibility of global responsibility and positive human values such as empathy, care, and love. The present articles assemble a philosophical debate around such positions and critical question. The article concludes with Emanuel Levinas philosophy and ethics of responsibility. However, we will not be confined to Emanuel Levinas only, wherever needed, we will be using the convenient thinkers such as peter singer, Socrates and so on for our central thesis i.e. care ethics as the first philosophy.

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Peter Kreeft famously quoted “Be egalitarian regarding persons but be elitist regarding ideas”, and excellently proposed how should we do the philosophy as per the nature of philosophy that is to be all-inclusive in terms of questions and critical problems. But it doesn't mean that all descriptions secure the same place except for some sound and unsound arguments. The history of philosophy is full of disputes and dichotomies within and out of the philosophical realm. In the west, the whole business stranded with pre-Socratic thinkers who were primarily interested in the physics questions: what is the fundamental element of the world? Is it air, water, fire, or whatever? And then Socrates, one of the main legend of western philosophy and its method and realizing the limits of the human mind, proposed that it is not in our capacity to grasp the nature of reality. Socrates was the very first thinker who challenged the conventional authority, for which he also faced the trial. Hillary Putnam called this Socratic trial ‘as the first Copernicus revolution’ since he brought morality from heaven to the earth for the very first time in a philosophical manner.ⁱ As Socrates

famously echoed: “It is not a trivial question, what we are talking about is how one should live.”ⁱⁱ Now with this Socratic motivation, we can ask whether it is a good approach to be elitist about Philosophical questions. In other words – if I ask how to live a good life? And what is the fundamental nature of reality? Then can we say that the former question is more superior to the latter one due to epistemic and pragmatic reasons? if the answer comes affirmative or near around it then our thesis that is to establish ‘the care ethics as first philosophy’ may get some solid foundation in one way or another.

Socrates looks forward to an idea that one could direct one’s life, if necessary redirect it, through a distinctively deep-thinking understanding – that is to say, general and intellectual, judiciously reflective, and concerned with what can be known through different kinds of inquiry. whole western history of philosophy has accepted the Socratic dictum “an unexamined life is not worth living”, as he proposed and critically asked – being a human i.e. rational being, what are our primary responsibility towards ourselves and also for others? Plato's conception of

justice beautifully answers the Socratic question when he considers social justice to be in harmony with inner equilibrium. Coming to the central theme of care ethics being as the first philosophy, we have to realize that evidently there would be plenty of disputes and challenges ahead of this thesis but from a humanistic point of view which is very much essential in the current covid-19 pandemic, it is the ethics along with scientific temper that can help us to conquer this tough time.

Aristotle, being Plato's philosophical competitor, provide very first consultations about "the first philosophy" throughout his masterpiece *Metaphysics*. And surprisingly, despite the great influences of Socrates who would surly oppose his idea as he earlier did, Aristotle proposed that it is metaphysics that deserve the designation of first philosophy. As Aristotle put it: "and there are as many parts of philosophy as there are kinds of substance so that there must necessarily be among them a first philosophy and one which follows this i.e. metaphysics."ⁱⁱⁱ (*Meta.* 1004a4-6.) However, he didn't clear what the first philosophy comprises. What he does

present a substantial challenge for the further philosopher who seriously devotes their time and energy to the self-image of philosophy and its disciplines. Emanuel Levinas is also one of those thinkers who took the target to this problem and bourgeoned that it is not metaphysics but ethics is the first philosophy. The Levinasian idea of 'ethics as the first philosophy' simply put that what has been conventionally observed as first philosophy, usually epistemology or metaphysics is not first in any sense at all. Moderately, all such positions are dependent on standard ethics. As Levinas put it: "the other...is what I am not,"... rather than an ontology (knowledge of being and reality), is "first philosophy."^{iv}

Levinas accepts Ethics first as the philosophy because every pursuit of truth and wisdom if it is observant to the individual integrity and responsibility towards others, then the sacrosanctity of the other arises out of a moral claim employed upon the knower in one way or other. As a result, Levinas is mainly apprehensive with the recitation of an ethical relationship with the other person that ought not to be reduced to thematization and

conceptualization, that is, to comprehension. He pinpoints this in what he calls the “face-to-face” relation. One of the important things which is worth noting is that by claiming that normative disciplines such as axiology are not divisions of philosophy but first philosophy. To such a challenging project, Levinas first of all began a far-reaching critique of the Western philosophical tradition “... proposing that philosophy, in a sense similar to psychoanalysis, is not simply the “love of wisdom,” as the Greeks would have it, but rather, the “wisdom of love at the service of love. Or as Freud says in one of his letters to Carl Jung, psychoanalysis is actually “a cure by love.”^v

But what the heck this ethics and later care ethics is which we have pointed out in this article? And how is it going to contribute to the covid-19 pandemic crisis? Before defining ethics as Levinas uses the term, it is necessary to contextualize such a definition in Levinas’s wider project. Typically we grasp ethics as a critical examination of normative questions such as — how should we live or how should we treat others, and morality as a way of knowing good and bad, right and

wrong and so on. Though Levinas might have agreed in a certain sense of both of these definitions of ethics and morality, however, most likely claim that they are not nearly normatively comprehensive, and certainly do not include what Levinas disruptively means by ethics. Levinas’s notion of ethics incisions much deeper than the aforementioned standard definitions of ethics and morality. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas defines ethics as follows: “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other ethics.”^{vi} Or in an interview, he elaborates that ethics as a — ...a compartment in which the other, who is strange and indifferent to you, who belongs neither to the order of your interest nor to your affections, at the same time matters to you. His alterity [otherness] concerns you. A relation of another order than that of knowledge, in which the object is given value by knowing it, which passes for the only relation with beings. Can one be for an I without being reduced to an object of pure knowledge? Placed in an ethical relation, the other man remains other. Ethics is no longer a simple moralism of rules which decree what is

virtuous. It is the original awakening of an I responsible for the other; the accession of my person to the uniqueness of the I called and elected to responsibility for the other.^{vii}

After making some basic sense of ethics that it is not mere a rational enterprise that concerns about certain prohibitions and affirmations, but represents a holistic way of life that concerns a relational approach to others. This is also the notion which care ethics proposes. Care ethics is a feminist philosophical perspective that uses a relational and context-bound approach toward morality and ethical decision making. Therefore, by establishing ethics as the first philosophy from the Levinasian point of view and noticing its philosophical resemblances with care ethics, we can imply that care ethics is also the first philosophy in one way or another but not stubbornly. With this empathic emphasis on the ethics and importance of others, our major premise that will respond to Bill Gates appthtic attitude towards vaccine formula sharing follows: Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are morally bad in a variety of ways

weither it is utilitarian approach which consider pain as a bad thing or altruistic approach which solicits in the service of others. Our Second premise implies that if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything important or causing self-pain, it is wrong not to do so. Third premise: By donating to aid helpful authorities, we can prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care, without sacrificing anything important. And finally, we may conclude that if we do not donate or get ready to aid helpful authorities when others are in crisis and we are capable to do so, we are committing something wrong. Bill Gates refusal to share the intellectual property of vaccines seems to fall in this trap due to some false reasoning. Let's grasp this with the following peters singers' case study /analogy:

On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather's cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young

child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don't wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for him and change your clothes, you'll be late for work. What should you do?^{viii}

Most probably, any rational being may get ready to help that child. Now let's stretch it more and ask what if the crisis is at global level like the current covid-19 pandemic and we are capable as an individual, billionaire, nation or whatever; will we be ready to help? Problem is critical as there are multiple factors such as national interest, personal interest, intellectual rights, cost and benefit ratio and so on which will present a great challenge in front of us. But such challenges persist as long as we look with a confined attitude. The moment we sacrifice such conservativeness, we will find

ourselves in a compatible situation of helping other irrespective of barriers. Bill Gates perhaps seems to trap in the latter category as his argument to refuse to share the covid-19 vaccine formula with developing countries doesn't seem sound enough. Obviously, he cited some security and expensiveness issues in sharing the Covid-19 vaccine patents with developing countries, but several reports and arguments can be highlighted which will show his profit-making aspect in the face of the pandemic. Gates cited the following reasons of not sharing vaccine patents:

It would not be feasible for a company to move vaccines to a developing nation. Here he specified India and that not all countries are concerned about moving the safety of a vaccine. He claimed that even if it happens, it is because of "our grants and expertise." Gates further said, "There's only so many vaccine factories in the world, and people are very serious about the safety of vaccines. Moving a vaccine, say, from a (Johnson & Johnson) factory into a factory in India, it's novel, it's only because of our grants and expertise that can happen at all."^{ix}

If we closely examine his reasons, we find that both of the

aforementioned reasons are vague and apathetic as well. It neither seems true to the slightest of thought from a pragmatic point of view as developing nations like India are capable enough to protect any risk with which gates unnecessarily have been frightened, nor seems ethical which we proposed above. Sad thing is that such views came into existence when Gates himself celebrated that the vaccine manufacturers are making such a technology transfer happen easily. Then anyone may ask, including Emanuel Levinas and Peter Singer, why it should not be practiced when the world actually requires this. Perhaps Gates seems much confused on this issue. We all need to acknowledge that this covid-19 pandemic might have originated at one place but apparently it is a result of global sharing through travel and so on. Therefore, we will have to solve it in a globalized manner. Only this approach can help us to solve the millions of lives which are at high risk. Obviously, being a philosophy scholar, it doesn't feel good to target someone personally, but it is actually a time when we will have come forward to help the world in any form. And if anyone disrupts this process/he

must be criticized at any rate. At last we would like to conclude with some sincere questions – what question is more important than “How should we live our lives and treat others well? We should appreciate such questions both in its personal, individual mode and also in its global, communal, or social, mode. In short, if we really want to live a meaningful and more flourishing life as an individual or even a nation, or wish to live together in a prosperous, flourishing community, then we will have to be more open-hearted and open-minded as well. It is the essence of Care Ethics which also makes it the first philosophy.

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