In Defence of Post-structural Ethics in Sociological Praxis: Derrida, Lévinas and Nancy

Btihaj Ajana, London School of Economics

B.Ajana@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of ethics in relation to sociological praxis by drawing upon the work of Levinas, Derrida, Nancy and others with regard to the notions of responsibility and singularity. Seen in light of these concepts, it claims that any given sociological research or text can be considered as a form of 'opening', 'sharing' and 'touch'. Ethics, in this sense, arises primarily out of this very experience of being open to irreducible otherness at the dynamic moment of the encounter with alterity. As such, rather than merely representing a set of predefined rules and pregiven codes of conducts, ethics becomes that which transforms the work of sociology itself into an ethical tool or space of hospitality for accommodating alterity and responding responsibly to the call of the other. Ethics, in this sense, becomes a way of resisting absolute knowledge, absolute certainty and the will to reduce the other into a 'graspable' category.

Introduction

It is commonplace now, at least in thought if not in practice, to regard sociology less as a tradition and more as a porous space, less in terms of its deeply rooted academic conventions and more in terms of its polymorphous interfaces and connections with other fields and disciplines. As argued by Andrew Webster et al. (2004), the growing interest in multi-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary research can be witnessed through the proliferation of projects that deal with a myriad of different areas such as biotechnology, bioscience, health care, and the environment amongst others. This trend is also apparent in the growing number of research centres and government-funded programmes that engage with cross-boundary research. But while this research trend is greeted with enthusiasm, it is also posing considerable challenges to the epistemological and methodological foundations of research, and particularly, to the notion of ethics. This has prompted a series of debates on the kind of ethics that might be needed to deal with the challenges of cross-boundary research projects. Currently, the overriding approach to ethics is largely framed within 'core principles' such as

those of 'beneficence', 'autonomy' and 'justice', or what is referred to, in practical terms, as risk/benefit analysis, informed consent and confidentiality (Webster et al., 2004; Redwood and Todres, 2006). The framing of ethical considerations alongside these generic principals is based upon a universal model whereby ethics itself is presented as context-free, and "good research practice" is narrowly defined as that which prioritises avoiding risk over achieving benefits (Webster et al., 2004). Embedded within this ethical framework is a 'dominant discourse' by which ethics is reduced to a set of predefined rules and codes of conduct, and filled in with the traditional and universal content of integrity, objectivity, credibility, and the like (Redwood and Todres, 2005; Zylinska, 2005, p. 3).

While it is not my intent to be completely dismissive of such normative values and their established guidelines, I want to argue in this essay that this dominant discourse may run the risk of silencing alternative perspectives and thereby closing off other ways and possibilities of 'thinking' and 'acting' ethically. As such, this paper is an attempt to explore another venue for thinking ethics in sociological praxis. I take my cue from the cluster of concepts offered by the continental philosophers Lévinas, Derrida and Nancy whose work is often invoked as epitomising "poststructuralist ethics".

The coupling of sociology and poststructuralism does not always yield a comfortable amalgam. Poststructuralism, whether in sociology or in other disciplines, remains all too often associated with forms of relativism, scepticism and nihilism (Popke, 2003, p. 299). Or else, it is regarded as being merely an intellectual indulgence in the play of words and a performative game of language which would make the possibility of an ethical enterprise unattainable. Such a reputation stems mainly from poststructuralism's theoretical detachment from the 'universal', the 'foundational', the 'normative' and its reliance, instead, upon the act of introducing doubt, instability, undecidability, contingency, and multiplicity into meaning, reality, truth, and knowledge. However, it can also be argued that it is precisely this detachment that lends poststructuralism its sense of ethics. It is precisely this commitment to destabilising all that which is regarded as fixed and value-free, that serves as a valid critique of already-established ethical paradigms. For instead of collapsing into universal principles and falling back upon a systematic choreography of codes and regulations, poststructuralism fosters what Campbell and Shapiro (1999, p. xi) refer to as 'an ethics of encounter without a commitment to resolution or closure'. So what does this 'ethics of encounter' stand for and what kind of possibilities can it offer, particularly to the field of sociology?

The ethics of encounter is a 'relational ethics', it is an ethics of radical

intersubjectivity, interconnectedness and interdependence (Popke, 2003, p. 303). It is what Emmanuel Lévinas calls the 'first philosophy' which comes before ontology itself, before any form of 'social mediation or philosophical system' (Popke, 2003, p. 303). Not that the notions of 'first' and 'before' are to be considered as temporal parameters (Zylinska, 2005, p. 13). Instead, ethics precedes ontology and epistemology insofar as it 'undermines the ontological primacy of the meaning of being' (Lévinas and Kearney, 1986, p. 23) and with it the primacy of the self. And in so doing, it breaks away from any attempt to 'thematize and conceptualize the other as always already known' (Zylinska, 2005, p. 13), or confine sovereignty to the autonomous subject. Thus seen, ethics for Lévinas does not represent a supplement to 'a preceding existential base'; a prior system in place, be it political, philosophical, cultural, social or otherwise. Rather, ethics constitutes the primary and essential structure of being and 'points to the radical and absolute alterity of the other' (Zylinska, 2005, p. 13). To put it simply, before we even "know" it, we are already in a space of ethics, before we even know it we are already responding to an anonymous call from the other whatever, whoever this other may be. And, it is for this reason that Lévinas believes that any attempt to appeal to a pre-existing or pregiven set of principles and rules to find one's way to ethics is doomed to failure if not even to violence. For what inheres to this notion of relational ethics is an irreducible sense of 'responsibility', a responsibility that precedes me, grasps me, takes me 'hostage', and whose source is the incalculable alterity of the other. Importantly, for Lévinas (1982, p. 96), this responsibility is not restricted to the act of doing something 'for'/'to' the other. It is rather the evocation of a response which 'answers, before any understanding, for a debt contracted before any freedom and before any consciousness and any present' (Lévinas, 1981, p. 12).

One might argue here that this primordial sense of responsibility, which Lévinas is describing, is precisely what tends to get betrayed, or at least overlooked in the process of moral codification and the setting up of rules of conduct. At this point, I would like to start linking Lévinas' take on ethics to sociological praxis by grounding the latter in the notion of responsibility while invoking some of the arguments put forward by Derrida and Nancy. If anything, the ethical heritage of Lévinas is uncompromisingly anti-prescriptive, so one should not hope to retrieve from it any ready-made template of how to act ethically. However, the 'relevance' and 'usefulness' of Lévinas' ethical thinking to sociology lie within its incessant calling into question of 'our place in the sun', i.e. our position in the world in relation to others. And, as far as sociology is concerned, this question is undoubtedly of utmost importance to the researcher.

In light of the Lévinassian ethics, one could postulate that every research is a form of encounter; a form of response; a form of touch and a form of responsibility. And without the other there could be no research (parenthetically, the other here subsumes living beings, objects, machines, the environment, etc.). As such, the researcher is confronted with the ethical exigency from the moment she is-in-the-world, from the moment the encounter with otherness occurs. From the moment she finds herself responding to the call of the other by conducting research. Here lies in a fundamentally ethical question; the question as to what call gets heard. That is to say, what counts as a worthy topic of research, 'what calls for recognition […], what is important enough to [write about] and fight for' (Zylinska, 2005, p. 35). In fact, one only has to recall here the rather Sisyphean experience of seeking research funding and filling in grant applications to realise that these are familiar questions, but questions that can hardly be avoided.

In *The Right to Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida (2002) provides some thought provoking reflections on the current state of educational and research institutions. He is particularly concerned with the turn to 'end-oriented imperatives' in research, which is driven by the 'desire for outcomes "labelled useful, profitable, and urgent"' (Trifonas' commentary, 2002, p. 96). These imperatives, according to Derrida, are part and parcel of the institutional totalisation which imposes certain criteria on research and defines in advance what is deemed relevant, worthy and useful. They are, therefore, one way of closing off the ethical horizon of research. Against these, Derrida calls for the upholding of the right to 'uselessness', or what Nancy (1991) calls the 'inoperative' that is intrinsic to the 'open-ended' intellectual activity (see also Boothroyd, 2004).

Derrida's argument *vis-à-vis* academic institutions, stands as a relevant example of the ethical impasse that looms over the Lévinassian sense of responsibility. This impasse has to do with the way in which responsibility is mediated in society. For, as far as social relations are concerned, one is never responsible for only one other but for a multitude of others. This is what Lévinas refers to as the 'Third' whose arrival complicates the status of the other as being the only object of ethical responsibility and transfers the self-other relationship into the political realm. This political realm is precisely 'the world of government, institutions […] schools, committees, and so on' (Lévinas and Kearney, 1986, p. 29). In our case, this can be funding bodies, research councils or heads of departments. From here, it appears that the problematic move from the ethical to the political is inevitable and so is the need to make decisions, judge, negotiate and choose. In the context of research, this amounts to the necessity of choosing between topics,

participants or research priorities in order to satisfy the requirements of the third part, be it the funding body or otherwise.

Admittedly, Lévinas seems to provide no other answer to this impasse except a resolution akin to the 'Kantian conception of the State as guarantor of right and justice' (Popke, 2003, p. 305). In other words, the comforting 'recourse to a metaphysics of sovereignty' (Popke, 2003, p. 306). This in turn raises more tensions vis-à-vis the Lévinassian notions of intersubjective ethics and irreducible responsibility toward the other. For 'the application of 'universal principles' as a mediator of politics always carries the potential to relieve us of our responsibility for our judgments and decisions' (Popke, 2003, p. 306) - after all, most of us are familiar with the phrase ' "don't blame me, I do not make the rules. I just work here. I am just doing my job"' (Caputo, 2000, p. 118-9). But if, as Caputo argues, 'all I had to do would be to invoke a rule, pull the lever of a universal principle, it would be much easier [...] and it would be far less "responsible". If things turned out badly, I could always blame the rule, the universal [, the institution]' (Caputo, 2000, p. 118).

So here is the point at which Derrida kicks in again. He challenges Lévinas even further by exposing the aporia that inheres to the notion of responsibility. In The Gift of Death, Derrida (1995) explores Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac in response to the commandment placed upon him by God. Derrida's reading of this example complicates Lévinas' trinity of the self, the other and the third, and leads him to conclude that responsibility toward any particular other is only possible by being irresponsible to another other and ultimately to all others. For Abraham's responsibility toward God, the wholly other, is wedded to the sacrifice of his son, the other other. And this sacrifice remains unjustifiable insofar as there is 'no normative grounding' to 'guarantee the justness of [his] decision' (Popke, 2003, p. 307), 'no access to the rationale behind the necessity for such a sacrifice' (Derrida, 1995).

The implications of Derrida's reading of responsibility in light of sacrifice may interestingly carry over into our discussion of ethics in research, and precisely in terms of our 'decisions' as to what others we should be responsible for, what participants we should include in our research. For each time we choose a particular other as the subject of our research, aren't we letting down another other? Each time we give a voice to a particular other, aren't we sacrificing the voice of another other? The ethical responsibility in research is hence intrinsically aporetic and always subject to the possibility of its own injustice. As a response to this aporia, one may invoke Derrida's notion of 'undecidability' which is not to be conflated with indecision. In fact, decision itself relies and feeds on undecidability. For without it, as Derrida (in

Zylinska, 2005, p. 36) puts it:

> *"... the decision would simply be the application of a programme, the consequence of a premiss, or of a matrix [...] it would simply be the application of a rule [...] if I knew in terms of knowledge what I have to do before the decision, then the decision would not be a decision [...] Ethics and politics, therefore, start with undecidability."*

While this notion of undecidability does not necessarily resolve the aporia of responsibility, it does, nevertheless, open an ethico-political horizon based on the respect of 'the event of the decision' (Popke, 2003, p. 307). This event is utterly singular and unprecedented, and without which 'everything would be reducible to calculation, program, causality, and, at best, "hypothetical imperative" ' (Derrida, 1991, p. 108). As such, the ethical responsibility that is facing the researcher is precisely the responsibility to 'take into account the whole spectrum of possibilities and occurrences, the horizon of which is always partially occluded by what we could describe as 'the spectre of the perhaps'', as Zylinska (2005, p. 37) puts it. This 'perhaps', this 'what if', constitutes the very condition of possibility for maintaining radical openness to the unknown which, one could argue, is the cornerstone of any research; maintaining radical respect toward alterity, and thereby saving the ethical endeavour from collapsing into 'prior knowledge' and from being reduced to 'absolute calculability' (Derrida in Popke, 2003, p. 307). For as Derrida (1999, p. 77) argues '(...) what comes will never belong to the order of knowledge or foreknowledge'. What comes exposes us to the event of the decision 'in its singular and incalculable context' (Popke, 2003, p. 308). In other words, what comes is always a surprise.

The key term to pick up here and dwell on for a moment is singularity which forms the edifice of Nancy's philosophical project and represents his ethico-political vision. Unlike Derrida, Nancy does not regard singularity in terms of sacrifice, but in terms of its perpetual exposure to other singularities; its experience of being-with. Yet both Derrida and Nancy agree on the notion that singularity is unique and unclassifiable. Or as succinctly put by Caputo (2000, p. 118) '(...) singularity is unprecedented, which is why it poses a problem for Anglo-Saxon law, which loves precedents, and it is unrepeatable, so it will not give rise to general rules which the theoreticians and authors of manuals can rush to record and organise into a general system.' This unique character of singularity has an ethical bearing on the way in which the research is approached and conducted, and equally on that empirical impulse to produce generalisable and representative results. For as soon as participants are regarded as singular beings rather than subjects or themes,

the ethical imperative becomes the renunciation of the desire to arrive at the 'absolute knowingness of the other' which, as Lévinas argues 'amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing it from its alterity' (cited in Zylinska, 2005, p. 34). Redwood and Todres (2006, p. 4) raise a similar point.

> *'As soon as we enter into an ontology or an epistemology in which we are dealing with human beings who are unique, and as soon as uniqueness comes into it, as soon as we move away from mechanistic, law-like products of knowledge and more into unique variations in our qualitative research, then that brings [...] an ethical pressure to become much more explicit about the status of our knowledge and its context. So it won't be used to impose a kind of "of course this is how it is" rather than "given this kind of researcher, given this moment in history in this kind of context, given these types of people and this kind of audience, these kinds of profiles are emerging".'*

In this respect, normative notions such as those of rights and justice are not considered as the fundamental premises of ethics. Instead it is the contextual and fleshy relation that binds one singularity to another (including the relation of the researcher to the participant) that is regarded as the main ethical issue (see also Haimes, 2002). So, rather than appealing to some forms of abstract generic principalism to address the ethical aspects of research praxis, emphasis needs to be placed upon the 'embodied reality' and the 'lived experiences' as they are mediated in corporeal and relational contexts (Haimes, 2002). Correlatively, this also requires a closer attention to the often taken-for-granted dividing slash between theory and practice, between value and facts and between the normative and the descriptive: for example, how things are and how things should be. For, 'how do we get from the "is" of "lived experience" to the "ought" of those judgments that require us to act in some justifiable manner?' (Macklin in Hedgecoe, 2004, p. 125) is precisely what cuts deep into the concerns raised throughout the thinking and practice of ethics.

By way of conclusion, one may suggest, based on what has been discussed hitherto, that the ethical moment of sociological research would be to create a *space of hospitality* for accommodating the plurality of singularities, including those who 'remain unidentifiable'. It would be to allow for the absolute, ceaseless, embodied and situated exposure to alterity. It would be to respect the unique moment of the encounter, the event of the decision. This does not have to lead to relativism, scepticism or nihilism.

Rather, this would necessitate a radical ethico-political engagement, a heightened sensitivity toward otherness, toward difference, a responsibility that cannot possibly be abrogated through the alibi of universal laws and guidelines. This would be to recognise that ethics is an open-ended, context-laden process that begins at the very dynamic moment we find ourselves confronted by the inescapable 'face' of otherness. Otherwise, the 'practitioners of ethics' will always come too late, or to use Caputo's (2000, p. 111) metaphor, they will 'appear rather like the crowd that gathers around the scene of an accident to see what has just happened'. But it is imperative that we *are* there on time, for there is no 'universal insurance' in the shape of guidelines that can provide cover for the potentially ethically sensitive collisions that our research endeavours constantly encounter.

Acknowledgments

Bibliography

Boothroyd, D. (2004). Deconstruction and everyday life, or how deconstruction helped me quit smoking. *Culture Machine.* Retrieved 28 April, 2008, from http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/cmach/Backissues/j006/Articles/boothroyd.htm

Campbell, D., & Shapiro, M. (1999). Introduction: from ethical theory to the ethical relation. In Campbell, D., & Shapiro, M. (Eds.). *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Caputo, J. (2000) The End of Ethics. In Follette, H. (Ed.). *Blackwell Studies in Ethics.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Derrida, J. (2002). *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*. Translated from the French by P. P. Trifonas. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Derrida, J. (1999). *A Dieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*. Translated from the French by P-A. Brault & M. Naas. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, J. (1995). *The Gift of Death*. Translated from the French by D. Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. (1991). "Eating Well": An Interview. In Cadava, E., Connor, P., & Nancy, J-L. (Eds.). *Who Comes After the Subject*. New York: Routledge.

Haimes, E. (2002).What can the social sciences contribute to the study of

ethics? Theoretical, empirical and substantive considerations. *Bioethics*, 6(2), 89-113.

Hedgecoe, A.M. (2004). Critical bioethics: beyond the social science critique of applied ethics. *Bioethics*, 18(2), 120-143.

Lévinas, E (1982). *Ethics and Infinity*. Translated from the French by R. A. Cohen. PA: Duquesne University Press.

Lévinas, E (1981). *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Translated from the French by A. Lingis. London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

Lévinas, E. and Kearney, R. (1986). Dialogue with Emmanuel Lévinas. In Cohen, R. (Ed.). *Face to Face with Lévinas*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Nancy, J.-L. (2000). *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Nancy, J.-L. (1991). *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Popke, J. (2003). Poststructuralist ethics: subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community. *Progress in Human Geography*, 27(3), 298-316.

Redwood, S., & Todres, L. (2006). Exploring the Ethical Imagination: Conversation as Practice Versus Committee as Gatekeeper. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research,* 7(2). Retrieved 28 April, 2008, from http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-06/06-2-34-e.htm#g1

Webster, A., Boulton, M., Brown, N., & Lewis, G.(2004). 'Crossing boundaries: social science, health and bioscience research and the process of ethics review'. Retrieved 28 April, 2008, from http://www.york.ac.uk/res/ref/docs/REFpaper1_v2.pdf

Zylinska, J. (2005). *The Ethics of Cultural Studies*. New York: Continuum.