

Welcoming the Youth: A Levinasian Ethical Response to Filipino Familial Norms and Practices

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Abstract

In the Philippines, children are often barred from participating in important familial and societal decision-making processes, as adults would invoke authority to silence the young ones from speaking and sometimes even treating children like retirement plans. Medina, Enriquez, Alampay, and Jocson, among other scholars, have associated this with the typical expectation that children should be submissive to elders and indebted to their families from birth. This paper examines how distorted perceptions of Filipino values rationalize and reinforce totalizing familial practices. In establishing this examination, the philosophical concepts of Emmanuel Levinas are utilized to develop an ethical response to the mentioned issues. Specifically, this philosophical exposition serves as a prelude to appropriation that involves two important actions: a curation of philosophical concepts in constructing an apt theoretical framework and pointers on utilizing the framework in the Filipino context. Thus, the paper proceeds as follows: First, I describe the traditional and evolving Filipino family setup by drawing from the findings of previous studies. Second, I construct a Levinasian ideal family inspired by his concepts of substitution and the Face, fecundity, hospitality, and eros. Lastly, from the first two parts I infer how, under the guise of traditional values, hides a Pseudo-face that totalizes. In response to totalization, I offer an ethical response on how Filipinos should willingly shoulder the infinite responsibility ethics demands.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, fecundity, Filipino family, hospitality, utang na loob

INTRODUCTION

Levinas made a revolutionary claim that ethics is the first philosophy. This claim has several implications, especially in the direction of Western philosophy, given that metaphysics or ontology has long been construed as the first philosophy. One of its implications is the priority of ethics or seeing moral command as the main emphasis before being preoccupied with the knowledge of beings.¹ This priority reverses the attribution of the 'there is' insofar as Levinas emphasizes the call that the intentional consciousness responds to, revealing the Other that commands us. In this manner, I aim to describe in a similar manner, an ethical response that reverses the normative structure that has been formed in the Philippines. Following Hofmeyr's remark that Levinasian ethical metaphysics is not pragmatic ethics, this ethical response tries to probe into the conditions that enable the unlikely event of ethical action.² In this way, his philosophy has to be appropriated further to derive practical ethics. In addition, for Levinas, this ethical call is always grounded in the lived experience, leading him to take a phenomenological approach to understand the constitutionality of consciousness. In the consciousness of reality, the radical alterity becomes the root of responsibility that troubles the moral agent. Since the family is considered the basic cell of society, I follow Levinasian philosophy as a framework to philosophically engage the topic of the Filipino family. Previous studies reveal the applicability of such an endeavor:

¹ Steven Crowell, "Why Is Ethics First Philosophy? Levinas in Phenomenological Context," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (2012): 564-65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2012.00550.x>.

² Benda Hofmeyr, "The Challenge That War Poses to Levinas's Thought," *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2024): 39, [doi:10.46992/pijp.25.1.a.2..](https://doi.org/10.46992/pijp.25.1.a.2..)

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas begins with the problem of politics that is opposed to morality³, which ends with statements that highlight the “marvel of the family” that goes beyond the framework of the State.⁴ This intentional structure led Simon Critchley to comment on the Levinasian idea of family as a distinct characteristic of his philosophy that inverts Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (discussion of the family to the State).⁵ From this, I infer that Levinas emphasizes ethics in resolving political problems at its roots. From a close reading of Levinas’s writings, scholars analyzed the implications of his philosophy rooted in a radical conception of family. For instance, Guenther expounds how Levinas responds to Hitlerism by delineating a renewed conception of kinship, materiality, and historical-social ties.⁶ Concrete integration of Levinas’ philosophy into practices such as ethical discourse and its congruence with family therapy, philosophy of education, and other fields show the viability of its application.⁷ Despite these explorations, Levinasian philosophy has not yet been applied to the context of Filipino families.

³ “The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means—politics—is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naivete.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 21.

⁴ *Ibid*, 306.

⁵ Simon Critchley, “Five Problems in Levinas’s View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 2 (April 2004): 174, doi:10.1177/0090591703261771.

⁶ Lisa Guenther, “Fecundity and Natal Alienation: Rethinking Kinship with Levinas and Orlando Patterson,” *Levinas Studies* 7 (2012): 1–19, doi:10.5840/levinas201273.

⁷ Larner et. al. wrote numerous works on the viability of Levinasian philosophical concepts in being integrated to discourse ethics, family and couples therapy. For the relation between philosophy of education and Levinas, Katz expounds this in her book section. Larner, Glenn, Peter Rober, and Tom Strong, “Levinas Therapy as Discourse Ethics,” in *Furthering Talk*, eds. Tom Strong and David Paré, 15–32. Boston, MA: Springer, 2004; Claire Katz, “Turning toward the Other: Ethics, Fecundity, and the Primacy of Education,” in *Totality and Infinity at 50*, eds. Scott Davidson and Diane Perpich (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2012), 209-226.

In terms of the normative structure that will be examined and responded to, Asian families are known for using authoritarianism as their normative parenting style.⁸ In the case of Filipinos, this also applies. In the Philippines, children are caught in a precarious position that societies have normalized. They are often barred from participating in important familial and societal decision-making processes, as adults would invoke authority to silence the young ones from speaking and sometimes even treating children like retirement plans.⁹ Medina, Enriquez, Alampay, and Jocson, among other scholars, have associated this with social-cultural factors, especially the typical expectation that children should be submissive to elders and indebted to their families from birth.¹⁰ Because of these reasons, this paper examines how distorted perceptions of Filipino values rationalize and reinforce totalizing familial practices.

In establishing this examination, the philosophical concepts of Emmanuel Levinas are utilized as a philosophical lens. I claim that the Levinasian philosophy emphasizes the infinite responsibility that the I has towards the Other, which is contrary to some Filipinos' totalizing familial practices. This ideal involves welcoming the youth in us, which evokes a consequential vulnerability that a sincere ethical response requires. In developing my arguments for this claim, this expository philosophical

⁸ See Chao, Ruth and Vivian Tseng, "Parenting of Asians," in *Handbook of Parenting*, ed. M. H. Bornstein. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 59–93.

⁹ For more information on tensions and challenges to child participation, see Bessell, Sharon, "Children's Participation in Decision-making in the Philippines: Understanding the Attitudes of Policy-makers and Service Providers," *Childhood* 16, no. 3: 299–316. doi: 10.1177/0907568209335305.

¹⁰ The following studies are relevant to this assertion: Alampay, Liane Peña, and Maria Rosanne M. Jocson. "Attributions and Attitudes of Mothers and Fathers in the Philippines," *Parenting* 11:2-3 (2011): 163-176, DOI:10.1080/15295192.2011.585564; Enriquez, Virgilio, *From Colonial to Liberation Psychology: The Philippine Experience*. Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1994; Medina, Belen T.G. *The Filipino Family*, 2nd edition. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001.

writing is a prelude to appropriation.¹¹ As defined by Demeterio III, this curation writing presents specific aspects of a philosopher's thoughts as a theoretical framework for studying particular aspects of the Filipino lifeworld. Furthermore, this philosophical writing style also gives pointers on how to utilize the given framework.¹² Thus, the paper proceeds as follows: First, I describe the traditional and evolving Filipino family setup by drawing from the findings of previous studies. Second, I construct a Levinasian ideal family inspired by his concepts of substitution and the Face, fecundity, hospitality, and eros. Lastly, drawing from the first two parts I infer how, under the guise of traditional values, hides a pseudo-face that totalizes (PFT). In response to totalization, I offer an ethical response on how Filipinos should willingly shoulder the infinite responsibility ethics demands.

FILIPINO FAMILY AND THE FAMILIAL NORMS AND PRACTICES

In this section, I present the traditional Filipino family, with modifications concerning the diversity being recognized in terms of structure and dynamics, expectations, values, and cultural practices. Thus, this paper does not intend to essentialize Filipino families but to describe their fairly general characteristics.¹³

¹¹ Given the nature of appropriating a Lithuanian-born French philosopher's concepts, I recognize the limitations of particular aspects (cultural, historical, and social factors) being overlooked in the application. Thus, future scholars pursuing a more thorough and broader appropriation should keep this limitation in mind.

¹² Feorillo Petronilo Demeterio III, "Revisiting the Controversial Category of Expository Philosophical Writing in Filipino Philosophy," *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2023): 300, doi:10.46992/pijp.24.2.a.6.

¹³ The study's scope is limited in several fronts: first, the selection of related studies are dependent on the accessibility of materials to the study's proponent; second, the familial dynamics of other forms of family such as solo parenting may be incongruent with some of the descriptions in this section. Third, the conceptual elements selected are the themes deemed relevant in relation to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

Structure of Filipino Families

Filipino family structures tend to become loosely applied and accommodate a larger scale than in other countries. For instance, it is a common practice for Filipinos to address strangers as *kuya/manong* (older brother), *ate/ manang* (older sister), *nanay* (mother), *atang* (father), *hijo* (son), or *hija* (daughter). Furthermore, relatively close individuals are typically addressed as *tito* (uncle), *tita* (aunt), or *anak* (child). Individuals close to Filipinos are also addressed similarly, depending mostly on their gender and age disparity between the two persons. Even in terms of public figures, this approach is evident. Examples of this are Wally Bayola's character Lola Nidora, Tatay Digong (Rodrigo Duterte), Kuya Win Gatchalian (Sherwin Gatchalian), Willie "Kuya Wil" Revillame (Willie Revillame), Ate Vi (Vilma Santos), and Ninong Ry (Ry Velasco).¹⁴ Morillo et al. note the familial attribution to strangers as a way to foster deeper relationships and endearment.¹⁵

In terms of the overall structure, Filipino families tend to be extended, including relatives (grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles), in-laws, and godparents. Filipino families also accommodate fictive kinship.¹⁶ Economic factors significantly influenced this setup since the

¹⁴ I thank the reviewer for pointing out this additional connection that extends the discourse to other strata of the social structure where familial attribution is demonstrated.

¹⁵ Hannah M. Morillo, Joseph J. Capuno, and Amado M. Mendoza, "Views and Values on Family among Filipinos: An Empirical Exploration," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 41, no. 1 (2013):7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23654807>.

¹⁶ Fictive kinships are originate from strong bonds formed from choices that deserve the name, family. Friends, employer-employees, and other similar relations can transcend to the level of familial ties, called in sociology, fictive kinship. In studying the usage of the term fictive kinship, I encountered its historical roots and the usual ascription of the term to minorities. In no way is this my intention in using the label. Rather, I aim to recover the essence of such a term by depicting the deliberate choice of each participant in becoming a part of a family, their commitment to fulfill their ethical relations (mostly willingly) and contribute to the good of mainly those who are family members. For more information on fictive kinship and association with minority, see See Margaret K. Nelson, "Whither Fictive Kin? Or, What's in a Name," *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 2 (2014): 201-222, DOI: 10.1177/0192513X12470621.

extension allows Filipinos to share responsibility, resources, and holistic support with their relatives and fictive kin.

Traditional Roles

In Filipino tradition, the father or husband is expected to serve as the family's breadwinner. Livelihood becomes the primary concern of the father/husband, while the mother/wife manages the home. However, these roles have evolved through time. According to Belen T. Medina, an expert on the sociology of the family, "In the Philippines, the traditional division of labor is no longer clearly delineated and some overlapping of roles have gradually taken place. The contemporary urban middle class Filipina, for example, not only plays the wife/mother role but also the partner role of breadwinning."¹⁷ Despite these changes, two vital roles remain necessary for the sustenance and development of the family. These are the external and internal relations. The former emphasizes the interpersonal dimension, while the capital-generating aspect falls under the latter. The pervasiveness of globalization further blurs the delineation between these two dimensions, with public and private spheres lacking clear boundaries.

Filipino children also experience certain expectations. Because of the child-rearing sacrifices, parents expect their children to feel gratitude towards them. This distinct feature seemingly portrays the Filipino habit called *utang na loob*. Filial obligations and parental expectations are fulfilled through formal education or work.¹⁸

Gender Stereotypes

Drawing from previous research, Alampay and Garcia note gender stereotypes concerning sons and daughters in the Philippines. Females tend to be associated as more committed to school, while males

¹⁷ Medina, *The Filipino Family*, 144.

¹⁸ Liane Peña Alampay and Aileen S. Garcia, "Education and Parenting in the Philippines," in *School Systems, Parent Behavior, and Academic Achievement: An International Perspective*, vol. 3, eds. Emma Sorbring and Jennifer E. Lansford (Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 81-82.

are expected to contribute through labor.¹⁹ This stereotype may create hasty generalizations and place unjust expectations. However, reforming this norm is challenging because other social institutions reinforce traditional gender roles. For instance, in education and mass media, mothers are often depicted cooking while the father works.²⁰ Through social media, the needed reforms are being highlighted as well. For example, learning modules for Grade 8 students demonstrate gender stereotyping.²¹ This incident incited Undersecretary for Curriculum and Instruction Diosdado San Antonio to admit the need for the agency to rectify such errors. One of the famous philosophers who advocated for such reformations is Sr. Mary John Mananzan. Drawing from feminist philosophy and liberation theology, Mananzan critically examines the Philippines' patriarchal culture that shaped Filipinos' identity and worldviews.²² She observed that mass media plays a significant role in propagating and reinforcing gender stereotypes in the Philippines. This remark comes from the sugar-coated "easy life" of being a housewife, the stereotypical portrayal of women as stupid or licentious, and the minor roles given to women.²³ Thus, the evolution of the Filipino family needs to reform some of the deep-seated patriarchal forms of thinking, and this evolution intersects with the improvement of other facets of society, such as education and mass media content.

¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

²⁰ Medina, *The Filipino Family*, 144.

²¹ Christian Deiparine, "'Archaic': DepEd official says materials with gender stereotypes should not be taught to students," *Philippine Star*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/10/21/2051257/archaic-deped-official-says-materials-gender-stereotypes-should-not-be-taught-students>.

²² Leslie Anne L. Liwanag, "Ang Pilosopiya ni Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB," *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (December 2015): 63, doi:10.25138/9.2.a.11.

²³ Ibid., 70.

Growing Trend of Physical Absenteeism

Economic instability challenges Filipino families to accommodate multiple work and familial roles. Thus, dual earners and dual-career families have become prevalent in the current society. With this shift in family dynamics, parents struggle with their inter-role as work-family conflicts often arise.²⁴ For example, a teacher/mother desires to be present in caring for the child, but the work demands more than the typical eight hours. More time is consumed preparing lesson plans, checking papers, etc. Thus, two earners benefit economically, but their well-being is sometimes compromised.

Furthermore, the migration of family member(s) also served as a means to respond to economic constraints and lack of opportunities in the Philippines. From April to September 2021, the number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) increased by 3.0 percent compared to the previous year. Thus, an estimated 1.83 million Filipinos are working abroad.²⁵ In light of these facts, physical absenteeism is growing due to largely socio-economic factors. However, it is also possible that some physical absentees are due to a *meta-blindness* of the parents.²⁶ For example, Filipino fathers tend to focus only on breadwinning and fail to see the non-material aspect of child-rearing. Thus, familial role substitution tends to happen, especially in an extended family. Now,

²⁴ Maria Angelica E. Señedo, and Jewish A. Merin, "The Prevalence of Work-Family Conflict on Dual-Earner Couple's Subjective Well-Being," *Journal of Global Economics* 9, no. 5 (2021): 1-5, <https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/the-prevalence-of-workfamily-conflict-on-dualearnercouples-subjective-wellbeing.pdf>

²⁵ "Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021 Overseas Filipino Workers (Final Results), *Survey on Overseas Filipinos*," December 2, 2022, <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-and-employment/survey-overseas-filipinos>.

²⁶ I utilize the Jose Medina's *meta-blindness* which is a form of blindness and insensitivity in the epistemic level. This form of blindness can be culturally generated or socially constructed. I claim that in the case of Filipinos, the gender stereotypes, specifically the traditional role of the father, impedes the parents from fulfilling the other needs of their children. For a psychological essay on this matter, see Ma. Lourdes A. Carandang and Queena N. Lee-Chua, *The Filipino Family Surviving the World: Psychological Essays of the Family* (Manila: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2008), 34-37.

examining the non-material elements being handed down, consciously and unconsciously, to children is important.

Filipino Family Values

The World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2022) provides a quantitative basis for the values fostered at home in the context of the Philippines.²⁷ Given the list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home, the top five qualities that were deemed important were good manners (86.4%), feeling of responsibility (63.7%), hard work (61.8%), tolerance and respect for other people (56.2%), and Independence (53.8%).

From these values, I infer the connection towards a reinforced practice of instilling the habit of Pakikisama (social harmony) and hiya (shame).²⁸ Filipinos are disposed to be sensitive towards other people, with independence and a feeling of responsibility, as always mindful of the social dimension. Good manners also pertain to more external conduct that adheres to socially acceptable practices rather than benevolence, as the motivation of their actions.

Barring Filipino Youth

The exclusion of young adolescents from the selected decision-making process stems from the traditional roles, placing the parents in a hierarchical position over the children. This dynamic is beneficial and acceptable, especially when the child does not have sufficient maturity and capability to participate in the decision-making process.

However, Filipinos are known for having certain paths dictated by some parents, even when the child is already mature to a

²⁷ Social Weather Stations, *World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2022) Philippines, Results*, (2019): 8-11, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>.

²⁸ These notions are often discussed in Filipino virtue ethics. I use the term habit in referring to a general term, with the possibility of becoming virtuous or vicious.

certain extent. Generally, adults tend to silence the youth whenever perspectives clash. Invoking authority as parents hinders adolescents from speaking out and feeling treated as if they are left in the interstices between adulthood (certain fulfillment of responsibilities are expected) and childhood (completely docile to parents). Despite various scholarly insights on the beneficial inclusive youth decision-making processes and child participation, not just in the family but also in society in terms of policy-making, there is a gap between the ideal vision and reality.²⁹

This precarious dilemma of adolescent children is further highlighted regarding educational paths. A study conducted by Andrew J. Fuligni, an expert on developmental psychology, showed that Filipino backgrounds placed greater emphasis on parental authority rather than individual autonomy.³⁰ The justification of family cohesion and social harmony downplays the personal independence of the child. This phenomenon seems to be a problem not only confronted by Filipinos but also by South Asian individuals. Intergenerational tension originates from the differing views of the new generation towards the previous generation, which upholds certain educational paths over others because of the parents' collectivist concern for family status. For example, having a doctor or lawyer in the family is considered prestigious in the Filipino family. Some parents pressure their children to take the path they envision for them. The justification for this familial power dynamic is further enforced through a misguided notion of *utang na loob*.

Distorted *Utang Na Loob*

Utang-na-loob is distinct from the usual debt of good will. Following Leonardo de Castro, Jacklyn Cleofas defines *utang na loob* as a “freely bestowed act of benevolence towards someone experiencing

²⁹ Sharon Bessell, “Children’s Participation in Decision-making in the Philippines: Understanding the Attitudes of Policy-makers and Service Providers,” 300.

³⁰ Andrew J. Fuligni, “Authority, Autonomy, and Parent-Adolescent Conflict and Cohesion: A Study of Adolescents From Mexican, Chinese, Filipino, and European Backgrounds,” *Developmental Psychology* 34, no. 4 (1988): 783, doi:10.1037/0012-1649.34.4.782.

extreme need.” Furthermore, three necessary conditions should be met: voluntary action from the actor, motivation by charity and sympathy, and no reciprocity expected from the receiver. However, in the case of some parents, the vicious form of utang-na-loob applies. A filial obligation is placed on children to care for their parents and siblings once they have attained income-generating capabilities. Thus, the impression of children becoming similar to retirement plans comes from several societal expectations being bred. Cleofas provides a theoretical framework to distinguish the vicious and virtuous forms of *utang na loob*. However, I present a Levinasian ethical theory as an alternative for this paper because of three postulates: (1) familial dynamics are marked with asymmetrical ethical relations, (2) overcoming the evolving form of Filipino requires an other-wise epistemic stance, and (3) addressing the particular application of the Levinasian ethical ideal calls for the third party, that is, the social dimension both within the family and outside it.

LEVINASIAN IDEAL FAMILY

In this section, I construct an ideal ethical family inspired by Levinasian concepts of substitution and the Face, fecundity, hospitality, and youthfulness. My form of writing bears a trace of the ruptures and disconcerting experience of encountering the other. Thus, I appeal for patience in reading through it.

Substitution and the Face

Filipino dynamics mostly adapt to our VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world. Thus, each family member and even strangers may experience the substitution phenomenon. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas describes substitution as an “extremely urgent assignation—an obligation.”³¹ This obligation has an anarchic character, i.e., non-thematizing new order, wherein the I becomes responsible even without prior commitment. This ethical situation is consistent with Levinas’ description of the imposing Face

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 101.

that bears a new order.³² Thus, transcendent inwardness involves a surplus of responsibility that is never limited to committed relationships. Furthermore, the imposition of responsibilities has urgency and can never be resisted, especially for an I that has become other-wise.

This extremely demanding ethical situation seems to be ideal. Still, the ethical call becomes an asymmetrical relationship wherein the I is responsible for the Other, but the Other may or may not do the same. Now, it is important to look specifically at the parent-child relationship. After all, Levinas reiterates that beyond the face, the I discovers the child.³³

Fecundity: Responsibility towards Children, Children as Other than the Self

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas identifies paternity as a paradoxical role that implies a “self-identification, but also a distinction within identification.”³⁴ To illustrate this further, Levinas explains how this father-son relation leads to a discovery of the self and the child as a stranger: “My child is a stranger (Isaiah 49), but a stranger who is not only mine, for he is *me*. He is me a stranger to myself. He is not only my work, my creature, even if like Pygmalion I should see my work restored to life.”³⁵ In other words, this Levinasian idea suggests how a parent continues to live through their child while understanding that the latter is a particular Other who is not limited to the projections of the former. Fecundity, for Levinas, then pertains to this infinite possibility wherein the parent-child relation nurtures a certain indeterminacy of fate that leads to a relation with infinite time. Levinas eloquently describes this: “Fecundity continues history without producing old age. Infinite time does not bring an eternal life to an aging subject; it is better across the

³² Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 170.

³³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 267.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

discontinuity of generations, punctuated by the inexhaustible youths of the child.”³⁶

This overflowing of being is also a phenomenon that comes with certain obligations. From this encounter of alterity, parents experience a dual movement: a resemblance of the self and a discovery of the other’s difference. In the same discovery of alterity, a certain vulnerability is affirmed, which solicits an ethical responsibility placed on the shoulders of the parents. Claire Katz, a Levinasian scholar and an expert on the philosophy of education, expounds on *Totality and Infinity* and describes how a child teaches the parent:

Here, the lesson that the child teaches the parent is of a different order — it is a lesson that calls the parent to ethical responsibility, to place the child before the parent; it calls for the parent to set aside his or own ego and turn toward the child, just as the I must turn toward the Other. The birth of the son turns the father not only toward the son in responsibility for him but also outward, toward the community, toward the other others.³⁷

Levinas then presents an ethical obligation carried by all parents. However, this obligation should not be considered an obligation for its own sake. This dynamic demonstrates a paradoxical imposition of a distinct gift, the gift of the power to give.³⁸ In other words, the Levinasian notion of fecundity points to a Desire that engenders desire.

In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas reiterates that paternity and filiality are never exclusive to biological kinship.³⁹ This “beyond the possible” attitude is present whenever the I treats the Other as kin. Thus, filiality has always been connected and extended

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁷ Katz, “Turning toward the Other: Ethics, Fecundity, and the Primacy of Education,” 220-221.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

³⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 70-71.

to even literal strangers. Following this train of thought, the discussion elaborates on how we can be hospitable toward the stranger.

Hospitality: Rupturing Encounter with the Stranger that Intrudes

Levinas often speaks of how being strangers brings one closer to their neighbors. A stranger appeals to my attention because of their foreignness from me. In the same way, the I remains at a distance because of my inability to properly *know* the person. This paradoxical relation provides the site for hospitality that caters to the radically other Other, who always remains a stranger or foreign to me. This intrusion of the Other presents a phenomenological critique of dwelling or “being-at-home” that may paralyze a solipsistic conception of a family.

The ethical call of the stranger, who does not knock but barges in, disconcerts the self’s tendency to proclaim that this is *my home, my family, my possessions*. The decentralization of the I becomes a focal point to a rupturing experience that renders the I possibly becoming other-wise.

This other-wise attitude opens the way for the Levinasian concept of the third party.⁴⁰ In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas emphasizes the broadness of the I’s obligation to the third party:

The poor one, the stranger, presents himself as an equal. His equality within this essential poverty consists in referring to the *third party*, thus present at the encounter, whom in the midst of his destitution the Other already serves. He comes to join me. But he joins me to himself for service; he commands me as a Master. This command can concern me only inasmuch as

⁴⁰ Further discussion the third party is beyond the scope of this article. Given the controversial takes on the realm between ethics and politics, this topic should be pursued as a separate matter. In Levinasian philosophy, there are three senses of the Third: the third party, the third person, and the illeity (from the root word “il” which is a singular third-person personal pronoun). cf. Robert Bernasconi, “The Third Party. Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30, no. 1 (January 1999): 76, doi: 10.1080/00071773.1999.11008545.

I am master myself ; consequently this command commands me to command. The thou is posited in front of a we. To be we is not to 'jostle' one another or get together around a common task. The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding.⁴¹

In this sense, the stranger does not have to be a literal face-to-face encounter and may be encountered through traces. A concrete example of this other-wise attitude is a conscious effort of the I to see how his actions can have repercussions for a stranger or strangers. Also, our ethical relationship is always connected to this third party, even if there is a literal physical encounter with an Other. This analogy of the stranger is apt in the Filipino setting, given that we are known for being hospitable. Instead of the usual inclination to be suspicious of strangers, we cater to strangers, especially those who are in need. This amicable trait poses certain dangers, but this ethical demand intrinsically comes with certain risks. Now, the discussion shifts the vantage point to a child who becomes a capable human being.

The Child as the I who is responsible for the Particular Other, the Parent

Stacy Bautista and Adriaan Peperzak point out that Levinas should have analyzed the child's perspective concerning its parents, given the universality of such a perspective.⁴² However, I surmise that exploring the child's vantage point is only applicable if a certain age and holistic competencies render them capable of making ethical decisions. Thus, in this section, I describe how the child is an I who is ethically responsible for their parents once a certain capability threshold has been reached.

⁴¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 213.

⁴² Stacy Bautista and Adriaan Peperzak, "Unspoken Unity: I, Who Enjoy and Desire," in Davidson and Perpich, 43.

As a child, I unknowingly teach my parents to think beyond themselves. In turn, my childhood comprised my parents teaching me how to make sense of the world I inhabited. Thus, an other-wise attitude has been instilled in me from the very beginning. From my needs to my wants, everything has been a gift. However, as I grow older, a context reversal arises. I encounter my parent as an Other for whom I am responsible. This responsibility denudes itself, especially when the other becomes more vulnerable and helpless. This ethical call can be riveting or haunting for the child, but it can also be erotic, a desire that does not come from a lack, nor does it aspire to possess. In the end, the child may fulfill a debt of goodwill willingly. This inclination to respond to the ethical call is discovered whenever the characteristic of youthfulness is being fostered.

Youthfulness

In *No Identity*, Levinas contrasts the youth with the pervasive discourses on the sciences of man that propel mathematical thinking that stifles the ego from going beyond itself. Youth is defined as in correspondence with the originary exposedness for the other. Levinas writes:

Uncovered in frankness in which veracity will, afterwards, be founded, and thus outside of every thematic display, here the subjectivity of the subject is innocent of ontological conjunctions, is prior to essence - is youth. but youth here does not mean simply the uncompleteness of a destiny newly entered upon, possibly calling for the essence. Youth, which the philosopher loves, is the "before being," the "otherwise than being."⁴³

Moreover, youthfulness involves a denuding that exposes the I to the mercy of the Other. Defenses are shed, and the Other is welcomed. This youthfulness is rooted in sincerity, a vulnerability that becomes *obsessed* with the Other. Thus, the I becomes always other-wise.

⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, "No Identity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

From this description, I consider the youthfulness in me and in others. The term youth is a double-edged sword that lets us be at the mercy of the other. If they truly desire to experience reality, human beings must always be open and welcoming.

THE PSEUDO-FACE THAT TOTALIZES AND THE LEVINASIAN ETHICAL RESPONSE

The Pseudo-Face that Totalizes

The totalizing consciousness or the consciousness obsessed with the I can manipulate the conceptual elements described in the previous sections. It also further solidifies its totality by exploiting the typical structure of Filipino families to their advantage. In this section, I focus on the pseudo-face that totalizes (PFT hereafter). PFT is an I that exploits its alterity towards the other insofar as the ethical demand is understood as an imposition rather than a gift given. Hence, this pseudo-face beckons the Other using different means to take hold. Regarding Filipino PFT, the structure has been used to extend its reach to a normative level. The following are some of its distinct characteristics:

- Instead of the holistic and paradoxical notion of fecundity, PFT only considers its child as an alter-ego, an extension of the self. Evoking the authoritarian norm in Asian families bolsters this practice.
- The anarchic character of substitution and the Face is only applied to the PFT's Other, not itself.
- PFTs forcefully obligate their child and other Others to be responsible and care for the PFTs. In this way, the distorted notion of *utang na loob* reinforces the PFT's dynamic as an acceptable norm. Furthermore, the fostered family values that incline toward conformity to societal norms are double-edged swords that can influence this matter.
- The PFT does not aspire for youthfulness or sincerity and practices a form of arrogance.

Parentified Children

The case of parentified children is utilized to illustrate the points in the previous sub-section. I claim that some parentified children can be considered examples of victims of a totalizing pseudo-face—in this case, an individual who should assume the parental role.

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, a known psychiatrist who helped establish contextual therapy, used the term parentification to refer to the role delegated to the child, specifically on taking care of the parent's needs despite the inappropriateness of the child's age in shouldering such responsibility.⁴⁴ There are varying degrees of parentification, some of which are also present in relatively healthy relationships. However, when the degree of parentification becomes extreme, this leads to a destructive form that places a heavy expectation, leading to a stunting of a child's personal development.⁴⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were cases wherein an instrumental form of parentification occurred in some Filipino families. In a study conducted by Teng et al. through online interviews and thematic analysis, the researchers uncovered that most of their respondents (young professional daughters) attributed *utang na loob* as a motivating factor to compliance with parentification.⁴⁶

From the daughters' perspective, the parentification entailed a significant commitment from them and had become, at times, an obstacle to their pursuit of personal goals and interests, leading to the sacrifice of some opportunities that went their way. The experience of parentification has generated varying effects: some respondents disclosed how the parentification made them closer to their families;

⁴⁴ Kristy L. Soloski et al., "Parentified Child in Family Systems," in *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, ed. Jay Lebow, Anthony Chambers, and Douglas C. Breunlin (Cham: Springer, 2016), 2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-15877-8_479-1.

⁴⁵ Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations of Contextual Therapy: Collected Papers of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, M.D.* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 417.

⁴⁶ See Jaena Clarice C. Teng et al., "Parentification Experiences of Filipino Young Professional Daughters during the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies* 3, no. 4 (April 25, 2021): 29, <https://doi.org/10.32996/jhsss.2021.3.4.3>.

others considered the experience neutral, with both benefit (resilience) and harm (time supposedly dedicated to personal endeavors was lost); some respondents admitted feeling frustrated and resentful towards the burden of responsibility they had to carry, consequently, further straining the interpersonal relationships within the family.⁴⁷

From these examples, I infer that the PFT can also have diverse effects on the Other empirically. The PFT relates to the Other through violence and domination, though it can be in a subtle manner. This domination involves the reduction of the Other as the same, an extension of the PFT's ego. This way, the Other's freedom and dignity are rarely upheld in a totalizing relationship. However, the silver lining is that the Other can still have the capacity to grow and resist totalization, depending on the degree of violence. Given that some Filipino cultural values and norms reinforce a totalizing relationship, the need for an ethical relationship that lets the Other's radical alterity unfold becomes challenging.

A Levinasian Ethical Response in the Philippine Context: How Do We Welcome the Youth?

Some Filipino cultural practices already align with Levinas' other-wise ethical philosophy. Familial address to others, extended families and fictive kinship, and social harmony and shame align with Levinas' notion of hospitality, substitution, and the epiphany of the face, respectively. However, some cultural practices, like silencing the youth and vicious *utang na loob*, are worth revising because they contradict Levinas' philosophy and create a culture of exploitative, *seemingly symmetrical* relationships.⁴⁸ For matters of traditional roles and gender

⁴⁷ Ibid., 28-29.

⁴⁸ The excessive debt of gratitude is considered contradictory to Levinas' philosophy if the parent as an I demand the child as an Other to reciprocate the gift. In terms of silencing the youth, the parents should recognize the child as a stranger and not an alter ego.

stereotypes, Levinas cannot offer much help given the limitations of his preoccupation.⁴⁹

In the Philippines, vicious *utang na loob* is reflected in different social standings. A case in point is Incess, who became one of the contestants of “Bawal Judgmental”—a popular segment of “Eat Bulaga.” In the said show, she shared how she has five children despite her young age. When asked for her wishes for her son, she said: “*Sa ‘yo Ace, sana mag-aral ka nang mabuti dahil alam kong ikaw ‘yung makakaahon sa amin sa kahirapan. Ikaw ‘yung pursigido para gumanda ‘yung buhay natin.*”⁵⁰ This remark made Maine Mendoza reply that she should not pass the burden to her children. She mentioned how they, as Ace’s parents, can still do more to alleviate their present condition.⁵¹ Recently, public figures have weighed in on similar issues, specifically on mandatory giving back to parents. In her podcast episode “The Difference Between Utang na Loob and Giving Back,” Dani Baretto, a celebrity mom, interviews Chardie B, a social media personality.⁵² In their conversation, they both agree that giving back to parents should come from one’s own decision or volition and not out of *utang na loob*, which has often been misused to justify mandatory giving back to parents. *Utang na loob* is even wrongfully evoked to ask for compensation after some parents have fulfilled their

⁴⁹ On matters of gendered reading of Levinasian philosophy, there are multiple sites of contention. Several feminist thinkers accuse Levinas’ discussions on femininity as still androcentric. Two important figures that criticized Levinas’ concept of the feminine are Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. For further discussions, see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 185-217.

⁵⁰ Kathleen A. Llemit, “‘Wag Ipasa Ang Responsibilidad Sa Anak’: Maine Mendoza Advises ‘Eat Bulaga’ Contestant,” *Philstar.Com*, March 12, 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/entertainment/2023/03/12/2251092/wag-ipasa-ang-responsibilidad-sa-anak-maine-mendoza-advises-eat-bulaga-contestant>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Dani Baretto, “The Difference Between Utang na Loob and Giving Back—Chardie B. | Episode 19,” March 29, 2024 in *The Bare It All Podcast*, Spotify podcast, 44:30, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4KstKpGcAaQ791etQHhugd?si=4339325044c049a0>.

obligation, such as helping their children finish their formal education. Another personality who aired out his comments on the matter is John Arcilla. He opines that just like parents have a natural and normal duty to care for their children, children also have such responsibility to their parents when they can no longer support themselves physically and financially.⁵³ Opinion sections in newspapers, online discussion forums, and other spaces demonstrate the unsettled opinions on this matter.

With these issues in mind, this study proposes that parents encounter an ethical responsibility stemming from the child's natural helplessness and vulnerability. This responsibility is an obligation that is fecund—a desire that engenders desire. Thus, fecundity brings to the fore an infinite responsibility toward their child. However, given this asymmetrical ethical relation, the parents should not demand the same treatment from their children.

However, from the child's perspective, they recognize an eventual infinite responsibility toward their parents. This infinite responsibility becomes more demanding, especially when parents are rendered helpless or vulnerable. Thus, the face calls them to help, even if the Other can never repay them.

Looking at the realities I presented in contemporary society, I also understand that the filial obligation springs from the investment idea created by their socio-economic standing. Thus, the burden of responsibility should also be carried by the different societal groups and institutions, especially the governing body.⁵⁴ This point leads me to my remarks on how we can truly welcome the youth. In an interview, Levinas admits that the child is sincere:

⁵³ Anne Pasajol, "John Arcilla Believes Taking Care of Old Parents Is 'Normal, Child's Duty,'" *Inquirer.net*, April 10, 2024, <https://entertainment.inquirer.net/550757/john-arcilla-believes-taking-care-of-old-parents-is-normal-childs-duty>.

⁵⁴ In my previous digression regarding the Third, I raise this point to show the possible connection of ethics and politics in responding to the issue of familial practices of totalization. This aspect may also be explored in the appropriation of Levinas to Philippine context but on the distinct ethico-political realm, which is contentious in Levinasian literature.

The child is a pure exposure of expression insofar as it is pure vulnerability; it has not yet learned to dissemble, to deceive, to be insincere. What distinguishes human language from animal or child expression, for example, is that the human speaker can remain silent, can refuse to be exposed in sincerity.⁵⁵

To be childlike is to be a youth that refuses to be insincere. This way of life is often deemed impractical and exposes the individual to various vulnerabilities. However, being hospitable and welcoming to the youth in us and others requires a risk worth taking. In this study, I consider the Levinasian paradigm as a way to veer away from the solipsistic emphasizing of the rights of an I and present how rights are meant to adequately respond to the infinite responsibility towards the other, demonstrating a path from morality to ethics. By showing that it is possible to reverse the normative structure, the specific alterations and approaches to realization must be drawn accordingly. This Levinasian ideal as an ethical response bears certain flaws, especially vulnerabilities open to exploitation. Thus, my ethical response to rampant Filipino practices of excluding the youth and the vicious form of *utang na loob* may need to be supplemented and modified if translated to the socio-political level (that is still far off from the ideal *ethos*) and needs proper re-appropriation rooted in individual contexts. After all, an ethical person can only prepare for the strangeness that intrudes.

CONCLUSION

This study has sufficiently provided a preliminary ethical response to Filipinos' precarious dilemma regarding the child's participation and obligations to their families. This response is limited to an ethical-phenomenological approach that uses the same dynamics of Levinas in reversing unquestioned normative structures in cultures and societies, and it aims to provide a scaffold for a more detailed appropriation of Levinasian philosophy to the Filipino context. After describing the current state of Filipino families and sketching a

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearny, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 29.

Levinasian ideal family, the study arrives at two main findings. First, a misconstrued understanding of ethical asymmetry has become the foundation for the justification of the I, which projects a pseudo-face that totalizes. The Levinasian ethical call to obligation is inverted. The I obligates the Other to fulfill its wishes. A manifestation of this PFT in Filipino families is the extreme forms of parentification of children. Such dynamics have crystallized a distorted notion of *utang na loob*. The second main finding is that the ethical response of welcoming the youth (both in literal and figurative senses) requires vulnerability and anarchic openness to our infinite responsibility to the Other and other Others. For future researchers, the appropriation may be challenging in some aspects, such as the traditional roles and gender stereotypes, given the contentious “androcentric” language of Levinasian philosophy. Despite these challenges, the points of convergence between Levinasian philosophy and the Filipino way of life can be considered fecund sites for ethical reflection.

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