

## **Levinas on *Socio-Political Responsibility and Beyond*: An Interview with Dr. Leovino Ma. Garcia**

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**Abstract:** Dr. Leovino Ma. Garcia is the Convenor of the first International Conference on Levinas to be held from July 13-15 July 2017 at the University of Santo Tomas. In this interview with a former student, Dr. Garcia recounts how he came up with the idea of organizing the conference and shares his insights on the thought of Levinas, particularly, on the notion of *ethical responsibility* and its relevance to the national situation.

**Keywords:** Leovino Ma. Garcia, Emmanuel Levinas, *ethical responsibility*, socio-political philosophy, Philippines

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*In a face-to-face interview last 12 May 2017, Dr. Leovino Ma. Garcia responded to the following questions posed by his former student, Franz Joseph Yoshiy II.*

**Come 13-15 July 2017, you will be convening the first ever International Conference on Emmanuel Levinas in the country. How did you come up with the idea of organizing a Levinas conference?**

**Dr. Garcia:** There are two philosophers whom I have been studying and teaching for some time now. I worked on a Ph. D. dissertation on Ricoeur from 1973 to 1981. From 1982 until the present, I've always given a course on Ricoeur. But when I was doing my dissertation on Ricoeur, (I think I told you this story) there were two friends who were also preparing dissertations, an Indian Franciscan on Levinas and a Dutch on a Chinese philosopher. So, during that time, I was also discussing the philosophy of Levinas with Sydney, my Indian Franciscan friend. When I came back from studies, I also began to give a course on Levinas around 1983. At that time, most of the sources

were still in French until *Ethique et Infini* (1982) was translated in 1985 but I was already using it as a textbook for my course. Ricoeur and Levinas were close friends; they are different but they have similarities. I've always dreamt of organizing an international conference on Ricoeur which I realized in November 2015. And so, that led to the next conference on Levinas. I contacted Prof. Roger Burggraeve, Professor Emeritus of the Catholic University of Leuven in 2016 and he immediately agreed. Another reason that encouraged me to go on with this conference is of course, to help clarify the issues on the death penalty and the extrajudicial killings. In 2007, I received an endorsed request from some thirty students headed by Fleurdeliz Altez to give a course in UST on Levinas. And that is how I started again to teach here in 2007 just a year before the COMIUCAP Conference. Since then I have alternated giving a course on Ricoeur and a course on Levinas and other courses in UST.

**Why study Levinas? Perhaps, you could tell us what inspired you to take up Levinas as one of your research interests?**

**Dr. Garcia:** Levinas is the philosopher whom we need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because he makes us appreciate difference, how to think difference as equality, I really think he is a fascinating philosopher, like Ricoeur. In fact, they complement each other. Levinas stresses the Other while Ricoeur emphasizes Oneself. Ricoeur interprets Levinas as hyperbolic because the present society is so I-oriented. That is why Levinas stresses the Other. But Ricoeur's position is that you must also look at yourself as an Other, so *Oneself as Another*, the title of one of his books.

**Let us talk about Levinas' philosophy and try to situate it within our present context, particularly here in our country. Levinas talks about *ethical responsibility* towards the Other. The moment we encounter the *Face of the Other* – it commands us: “thou shall not kill.” But then, at the same time, this *Face*, in its nakedness and vulnerability, invites us to murder it, to kill it. As I see it, this is a paradox. Is my understanding correct? And, could you please elaborate on these very important topics – that of *ethical responsibility, the Face, murder* etc. – in the thought of Levinas.**

**Dr. Garcia:** The Face doesn't invite us to kill it. But because of its nakedness and vulnerability, we are tempted to kill it. If you are not ethical, the tendency would be to hurt it. The command “thou shall not kill” has a positive aspect. The Other is also pleading with you to respect it, to take care of it, to be with it, not to abandon it. At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas says that violence is not only to kill but *to frustrate the substance, the possibilities of somebody*. What is unique about Levinas's philosophy is that it is not only an intersubjective philosophy but a social-political-ethical philosophy. It is not just

between I and the Other, but also about the third party, the many Others. That's why I insisted that Burggraeve concentrate on this social-political-ethical responsibility. Then you will see that it is not a naïve philosophy but a really balanced philosophy which appreciates organization, technology, and compassion to bring about a just and peaceful society. What was termed at the beginning, as the totalization of things is not basically bad if this is done to promote the dignity of people.

**Given your elaboration on Levinas' notion of *ethical responsibility*, would you agree that his thought is more relevant than ever – particularly, with the present situation here in the Philippines – there is a rampant violation of human rights, extra-judicial killings?**

**Dr. Garcia:** Yes, it is very relevant. We all need to reflect on our ethical-social-political responsibility to Others. For Levinas, before defending my rights I must first defend the rights of the Others, because justice begins with the Other. We must not act only because our rights have been trampled. We must defend the rights of the Others. The humanism of Levinas is not a humanism of the I but a humanism of the Other.

**Is this the reason why the upcoming conference has as theme “*Levinas: On Socio-Political Responsibility and Beyond?*” The conference finds itself in a very timely situation.**

**Dr. Garcia:** Yes, very timely not only here but for all the world. We see people becoming afraid of differences, becoming “allergic” to Others. Global politics have become very populist and demagogical. One happy note is that Emmanuel Macron who became the President of France was for some time an assistant to Paul Ricoeur. Some journalists have noted that the reason why Macron won is because he may have

remembered Ricoeur's idea that the more a society becomes complex, the more solutions cannot be simplistic, fundamentalist, Macron won because the extreme left and the extreme right did not want to make people come together and talk about their differences.

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*Dr. Garcia during the pre-conference workshop on Levinas last  
12 May 2017 (Photo by Franz Joseph C. Yoshij II)*

another international conference – this time on the philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. He currently teaches at the University of Santo Tomas and Ateneo de Manila University. The University of Santo Tomas Graduate School recently awarded him the St. Thomas Aquinas Professorial Chair in the Humanities for Academic Year 2017-2018.

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**Dr. Leovino Ma. Garcia** is one of the foremost philosophy professors in the Philippines. He is the country's leading scholar on the philosophies of Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas. He holds a doctorate degree from the *Université Catholique de Louvain*, Belgium. For promoting cultural relations between France and the Philippines, Dr. Garcia was bestowed the rank of Knight, *Order of the Academic Palms* in 1989 and the rank of Officer, *Order of Arts and Letters* in 2008 by the French Government. He was also bestowed the rank of Commander in the *Order of Leopold II* by the Belgian Government in 2012 for promoting cultural relations between Belgium and the Philippines.

Dr. Garcia convened the international conference on Paul Ricoeur here in the Philippines last November 2015. On 13-15 July 2017, Dr. Garcia will once again convene