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Ethics of Cognitive Distance in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract. In the past few decades, there has been a flood of investigations into Beckett's most celebrated play *Waiting for Godot*. The play has been explored in terms of the way the protagonists endure affliction, and absurdity. These readings, one way or another, have mostly highlighted the protagonists' fruitless search for human values and meaning. In contrast with these accounts, this paper aims to focus on the interconnection between the concept of cognitive distance and ethics to show how the two protagonists in the play, despite lack of meaning, portray rewarding overtones of ethical relation to the Other. This ethical distance helps them establish not only an ethical relationship with one another, but also an ethical interaction with alterity in general. Drawing on what the philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, conceives of the concept of distance in his ethical Same-Other relation, this paper concludes that Beckett's couple can also be portrayed as figures with a valuable Same-Other relation regardless of predominant anguish and absurdity in their lives.

Keywords, Beckett, ethics of distance, Lévinas, same-other relation.

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, there has been a flood of investigations into Beckett's most celebrated

play *Waiting for Godot*. The play has been constantly explored in terms of the way characters endure affliction, emptiness, and absurdity. It is generally conceded that Beckettian figures eventually lack direction and that they represent «the universal plight of man, unprotected by earlier cultural assurances or belief systems» (Levy [2002]: 222). Martin Esslin, the major precursor of Beckett studies, mainly speaks of the profound existential anguish as the elemental feature of *Waiting for Godot*. Similar to Esslin's line of thought, though from a different perspective, contemporary commentators regard the protagonists as starving infants who feel the void between them and the «primary maternal object», that is, Godot (Keller [2002]: 134) or as figures for whom «life is simultaneously utterly wretched and wretchedly brief» (Zeifman [2011]: 50). These readings in general characterize Beckett's dramatic figures as beings who burden an enormous measure of anxiety, suffering, and meaninglessness. On the other hand, there are very few commentators who have argued for the positive message this play ultimately implies regardless of its bleak dramatic features. For instance, David Kleinberg-Levin interprets Beckett's account of human stories in general as an account that takes us into the very depths of suffering, yet evokes «the longing for a finer humanity, keeping alive the promise of happiness» (Kleinberg-Levin [2015]: 7). Michael Y. Bennett in his *Reassessing the Theatre of The Absurd* highlights the parabolic feature of the play asserting «now that visiting Godot may be far-fetched for them, they realize that their lives are meaningful because of their relationship» (Bennett [2011]: 51). Unlike many scholars, Bennett draws our attention to the significance of renewal of humanity as a result of the unintelligibility of the world. It seems undeniable that the term absurdity starkly occupies the background of the play, and this term has consequently occupied the foreground of many Beckett studies to a certain degree; nevertheless, does that by necessity indicate pointlessness of their type of relation with the world and other characters? There is, one should note, a distinction between what the absurd world can ultimately offer us and how we ultimately shape our relation to the absurd world. In case of the former, one may respond that, in the end, the absurd world cannot offer anything meaningful and objectively valuable to Beckett's couple. However, in case of the latter, the way they shape their relation to the world, for the most part, comes from their own outlook on alterity, which benefits both the type and quality of the protagonists' relation to the Other. It is this ethical relation that rescues Beckett's dyad, Vladimir and Estragon, from the dominant shadow of «plight of man» in the absurd world, and yet has not undergone much critical scrutiny. This paper aims to argue that *Waiting for Godot* portrays powerful overtones of ethical relation to the Other on the basis of distance, a relation which will be referred to as ethical distance throughout the paper. To this end, it is shown that how the concept of distance between Self (Same) and the Other, despite the negative connotation of the term distance *prima facie*, ac-

tually helps the protagonists establish not only an ethical relationship with one another, but also an ethical interaction with alterity in general. Moreover, the type of distance that will be examined here initially characterizes distance within human cognition. Put simply, the use of the term distance here does not suggest physical distance; rather, distance here means cognitive distance, that is, when Self is cognizant of the fact that there is a distance between oneself and other entities, and this awareness basically must occur within the human subject's mind. In this respect, we draw on Emmanuel Lévinas's view on the concept of distance at the heart of his ethical approach to the Same-Other relation (relation with the world and other human beings). The paper shows how Lévinas's concept of distance and Beckett's dramatic approach to the same concept in *Waiting for Godot* present an ethically similar frame of reference. The significance of Lévinas's ethical theory is that it centers on the relation of Self to the Other. Also, in Beckett's drama, we observe that «rather than staging individual alienation, Beckett acknowledges a profound interaction between self and other» (McMullen [2007]: 458). It is indeed worth noting that the type of Same-Other relation in both Lévinas and Beckett's ethical framework defies any prescriptive reading. Beckett refuses any attribution of normative prescription to his dramatic works. Lévinas's ethical distance does not aim to enact particular ethical norms or laws either. Marc C. Santos (2011), in favor of Lévinas's ethical views, argues that «in Lévinas, one will not find moral laws, commandments to be followed, [...] because any such ontological structure necessarily contradicts the absolute Law of responsibility» (Santos [2011]: 775). In fact, Lévinas's approach to his ethics of the Other reveals that he aims to draw one's attention to the incomprehensible nature of the Other to begin with, not how to define specific moral patterns. For Lévinas, this incomprehensibility is metaphysical as he brings to the fore the idea that «the true life is absent. But we are in the world». Metaphysics as specified by Lévinas is turned toward the «elsewhere» or the «other» (Lévinas [1979]: 33). Also, Beckett and Lévinas's ethical approach to the same-other relation are both phenomenological in the sense they explore the issue of Self's encounter with the Other and how things seem to be but may not be comprehensible. On this account, Lévinas's ethical view on the relation of self to the other seems to correspond well with Beckett's vision of self and the other.

This paper sets out to explicate the conception of distance based on Lévinas's account of the term at the core of his ethics of responsibility for the Other. Then, what is considered the Lévinasian Same-Other independent relationship within distance is examined in terms of Vladimir and Estragon's relationship with one another and their interaction with the world. This type of analysis offers a novel apprehension of how the concept of distance has immediate bearing on the protagonists' responses to the other and how the concept of distance pertains to the subsequent feature of a healthy relationship within independence. As Lévinasian

approach suggests, and we shall discuss it later, proper ethical distance brings independence for the other. Prior to moving on to elaborating on the concept of (cognitive) distance and its ethical outcome and independence in the Same-Other relation, it is important to know that Lévinas basically provides an extremely comprehensive account of Same-Other relation for which he employs a wide range of interrelated key concepts like responsibility, desire, distance, sensibility, proximity among others. However, the Lévinasian concepts that receive primary focus in this paper are concept of desire and distance as two prerequisites for Lévinas's ethical framework in general. It is therefore essential to initiate, in some detail, the discussion by showing how desire presupposes cognitive distance in his ethical theory. It is then concluded that from Lévinasian ethical point of view, Beckett's couple can be portrayed as figures with a valuable Same-Other relation.

2. Desire and cognitive distance in Lévinas

Lévinas's concept of desire at the beginning of his book *Totality and Infinity* provides an essential paradigm for his theory of the Other. Primarily, Lévinas emphasizes a type of metaphysical desire that cannot be satisfied like worldly desires for the latter only bear «resemblances to metaphysical desire» (Lévinas [1961]: 34). In other words, worldly desires only produce the illusion of satisfaction (they are attainable) whereas metaphysical desire only deepens rather than becomes fulfilled. Why does metaphysical desire deepen rather than become fulfilled as Lévinas posits? It seems that because the nature of metaphysical desire originates from alterity, it cannot possibly turn into the Same. The Same can only represent alterity from their point of view and not what the essence of the latter in actuality is. For Lévinas, «beyond any possible negation there will always remain an irreducible 'there is' (il y a), even if nothingness is precisely all that there is» (Weller [2006]: 5). This irreducible there is always appears to us within a distance between Self (Same) and what is outside-of-self: *autrui* (the Other). In this regard, James Mensch says that «the closing of the gap between the desire and the desired does not occur» (Mensch [2015]: 38). Mensch points out how the content of the desired in Lévinas's theoretical framework escapes thematization and how Lévinas perceives representation to be a means of totalization that ultimately dissolves the other into the same. The unattainable nature of metaphysical desire causes the Same to feel unable to represent what is not I. Here, the concept of metaphysical desire gives rise to a type of relation between the same and the other that is indicative of cognitive distance rather than physical distance. Cognitive distance should be regarded as the type of distance that the Same feels between themselves and the Other (e.g. the metaphysical desire) not in the physical world but in the Same's mental process of acquiring

knowledge and understanding through thoughts and experience. At this point, Lévinas proposes, a relationship is established between the same and the other that positively feeds on what is desired and yet cannot be obtained. Lévinas calls it «a relationship whose positivity comes from remoteness» (Lévinas [1961]: 34). He basically perceives the I to be in a state of *pouvoir* (sway) that cannot cross the distance that the alterity of the other inherently bears (Lévinas [1961]: 38). In line with this viewpoint, Jacob Meskin calls attention to the fact that for Lévinas the subjectivity of the individual cannot have grounds without alterity which functions as the presupposition of this relationship. Meskin suggests that the core of one's identity is in a sense «inhabited by» or «animated by» another person (Meskin [2000]: 85). Although the alterity of the other is housed by the I's singular identity, this proximity still cannot make the ethical cognitive distance between the same and the other disappear. One major characteristic of this type of distance or remoteness in the same-other relationship is independence. This means while the I depends on the alterity of the other, it at the same time acknowledges the distant or independent nature of the other. It is a relationship which Lévinas calls «a relationship within independence» (Lévinas [1961]: 104). It is through the cognitive distance that the same approaches alterity and demonstrates ethical distance in their interaction with the other.

3. *Desire and cognitive distance in Beckett's Waiting for Godot*

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett clearly draws out his two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon in a puzzled state of being. They repeatedly appear willing to abandon their hope and not to. Vladimir's opening line "nothing to be done" often-times gives place to his hope to actually do something.

VLADIMIR. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.). (Beckett [1954]: 3)

Vladimir's words here suggest that there must be a desire (the term will be discussed in the next paragraph) vital to his deeds that prompts him to resume the struggle against all odds. This combination of desire and hope noticeably proceeds as the dyad keeps waiting. On another occasion, when he enquires about Estragon's well-being after the previous night's beatings, Vladimir expresses sympathy with the anguish of man even though people often grow insensitive when suffering is repeated mechanically and then refuses to «lose [...] heart now» cheerfully (Beckett [1954]: 5). Notwithstanding adversities, the idea of helplessness of man is not absolute for him and does not impel him to yield to total absurdity. Whether his sense of gloom is for Estragon's miserable state (when

he is beaten by some unknown men) or it takes a more universal form for humanity, it depicts Vladimir's striving to maintain hope and revolt against desperation.

Hope and desire in *Waiting for Godot* are correlative. Although desire precedes hope in general, hope is not equivalent to desire or to an expectation of a favourable outcome (what one desires). In fact, hope is a vital coping resource that suggests the possibility of a favourable outcome (Lazarus [1999]: 675). Vladimir's remark that he has not tried everything immediately draws attention to two major aspects of hope, one is the possibility of a desired outcome and the other is the «denial» of the impossibility of it (Lazarus [1999]: 675). Vladimir indirectly denies his own earlier statement «nothing to be done», which corresponds to his belief that it is still possible for a favorable outcome. Also, if human struggle is to be resumed, in the case of Vladimir, his hope is «pragmatically rational» in the sense that it promises sufficient self-efficacy through which one can assert one's own agency for «direction and control» (Pettit [2004]: 160) regardless of what one can eventually achieve. In the play, the concept of hope follows the concept of desire, but nonetheless what they specifically desire is neither clear to the couple themselves nor to the audience. Despite the indeterminacy of their desire, the type of their desire is significant in that it can hardly be reduced to worldly desire. Vladimir and Estragon's type of desire to a great degree revokes Lévinas's statement that «metaphysical desire is “not like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell» (Lévinas [1961]: 33). In Lévinas's account, the same can possess these realities and satisfy himself, thereby reabsorbing the alterity of the entities into his own identity. This way, the same becomes a possessor whether through material things like bread and land or through thinking like thematizing entities. For instance, when Pozzo asks them what they are doing on his land of which he claims to be the owner, Vladimir says that they do not intend any harm (any possession) and Estragon continues to reassure him that they mean well (only waiting in his land). Also, at the moment of departure in act I, Pozzo believes the pair to have been «onest fellows» and «civil» to him and offers to return their kindness to which Vladimir, while stopping Estragon's immature request to be given ten francs, responds determinedly that «we are not beggars!» (Beckett [1954]: 33). Moreover, if we base the argument on what can be observed from their physical and materialistic status (their old age, shabby clothes, homelessness, little amount of rotten carrot) in life, we readily discover that Vladimir and Estragon can be regarded less as possessors than seekers. Lévinas in his *Time and The Other* describes the nature of this seeking:

The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This 'not knowing', this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come (Lévinas [1979]: 89).

Similarly, for Vladimir and Estragon, ultimate meaning they look for would be found in the shape of a non-materialistic life rather than worldly pursuits, otherwise they would have been in possession of at least adequate number of belongings at that age. It distinctly seems to be the case because when we find Estragon in act I asking Vladimir «what exactly did we ask him [Godot] for?» (Beckett [1954]: 26), both Vladimir and Estragon respond «nothing very definite» or «a kind of prayer». The way they describe their request can be an indication of two significant points. One is that they treat the content of their desire with uncertainty (A kind of), which recalls Lévinas's view that the individual who has metaphysical desire does not know what it seeks and the other is that the word prayer normally transcends the physical world and is basically sought in the realm of metaphysics. Their desire therefore hardly embodies the greed with which the Same assimilates the Other. Assimilation is characteristic of a need while metaphysical desire brings about «an uncharted future before me» (Lévinas [1961]: 117) just as Vladimir and Estragon depict their future of waiting for Godot with uncertainty. Although the absurdity of the world might have been one reason for the emergence of a metaphysical desire, what has caused their type of desire is not the focus of the discussion here. Rather, the focus is on the current state of their desire against absurdity which aligns with Lévinas's perspective of metaphysical desire.

Vladimir and Estragon's intentions as couched in their dialogues seem to convince one that their type of desire is highly unlikely expected to be fulfilled. This therefore demonstrates the remoteness of the other and that the two protagonists give us the impression that they understand the remoteness of alterity. For we find them unable to thematize their own desire as human beings and whether Godot's offer can be any source of mental comfort and closure of despair. In this respect, Graver proposes that «what it is like and what it means to exist in a state of radical unknowingness» is what features Beckett's dramatic approach to human existence (Graver [2004]: 22). The distance they feel, due to their state of unknowingness, from the alterity of the world is explicitly depicted in their temporal and spatial encounter with alterity as well:

ESTRAGON. We came here yesterday.

VLADIMIR. Ah no, there you're mistaken.

ESTRAGON. What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR. What did we do yesterday? [...]

ESTRAGON. In my opinion we were here.

VLADIMIR. (looking round). You recognize the place?

ESTRAGON. I didn't say that. [...]

ESTRAGON. You're sure it was this evening?

VLADIMIR. What?

ESTRAGON. That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR. He said Saturday. (Pause.) I think. [...]

ESTRAGON. (very insidious). But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (Pause.) Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday? (Beckett [1954]: 18)

Their confusion over conceptualizing what exactly they were doing yesterday, what day it was or if they were in the same place as they are now prevent them from drawing conclusions. Estragon feels weary when Vladimir keeps asking him, «You don't remember any fact? any circumstances?». His replies to Vladimir usually are: «How would I know? In another compartment. There is no lack of void» (Beckett [1954]: 135). When cognition does not or cannot ascertain obvious perception of such concepts as time and space, it seems to hint how themes and concepts that define their surroundings are absent from their cognition of the world. An uncertain mind tends to reduce or even eliminate the process of thematization because thematization requires a sufficient degree of certainty to thematize to begin with. Although Beckett's men physically appear to be bound in the cyclic loop of temporality and spatiality which never seem to end, they to a great degree appear cognitively unbound from the two concepts. Peculiar to Beckett's drama is the fundamental concept of uncertainty that here, from Lévinasian ethical perspective, seems to benefit the two men. Although certainty should not be regarded as negative per se, it potentially causes human mind to totalize and therefore dominate alterity on the basis of the type of knowledge he accounts as certain on a subjective rational ground. Throughout history, the illusion of epistemic certainty has given rise to myriads of wars, colonization, and exploitation. Basically, in epistemology, there must be certainty in what one claims to be rational knowledge. Regarding the problematic nature of certainty, Jason Stanley argues:

knowledge requires epistemic certainty, and being epistemologically certain of a proposition requires having independent evidence that logically entails that proposition. Since we do not have such evidence for external world propositions, we do not know external propositions. (Stanley [2008]: 35)

The fact that Vladimir and Estragon cannot thematize with certainty what the arrival of Godot will bring to their lives can be in fact an indication of their rationality. What if Godot's offer could not salvage the two tramps? On what logical evidence should they be expected to base their knowledge of what Godot can do for them? Such an attitude toward what is and remains outside-of-self, thus, positively affects not only their approach to the world as the unknown Other, but also the dyad's relationship with each other. The two old tramps entitle the other to his own distance and independence. The same-other interaction in fact is «not the disappearance of distance, not a bringing together» (Lévinas [1961]: 34). Throughout the play, Vladimir and Estragon demonstrate a significant degree of

dependency on one another to survive the absurdity and anguish of what befalls them. Nevertheless, they keep their relationship with the Other at a level of ethical distance or independence insofar as the Other does not feel forced to stay or leave or has to reduce his radically distinct alterity to obeying the Same.

In the opening of both acts, when they first encounter after a stint of Estragon's absence, Vladimir expresses his preference for his friend's presence by expressing his joy with such statements as «So there you are again», «I'm glad to see you back», «I thought you were gone forever», «together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this», «Come here till I embrace you». These scenes seem to be a portrayal of Vladimir's dependence on the presence of Estragon. If dependence is defined as a «need for contact, approval, and attention» (Sroufe et al. [1983]: 1626), then Vladimir's sense of cheer at sight of his friend for the most part seems to be suggestive of his need for contact. On another occasion, Vladimir again reveals his dependence on Estragon's otherness as a source of contact and comfort:

VLADIMIR. Gogo!... Gogo!... GOGO! Estragon wakes with a start.

ESTRAGON. (restored to the horror of his situation). I was asleep! (Despairingly.)

Why will you never let me sleep?

VLADIMIR. I felt lonely.

ESTRAGON. I had a dream.

VLADIMIR. Don't tell me! [...]

ESTRAGON. (gesture toward the universe). This one is enough for you? (Silence.)

It's not nice of you, Didi. Who am I to tell my private nightmares to if

I can't tell them to you?

VLADIMIR. Let them remain private. You know I can't bear that. (Beckett [1954]: 20)

While Vladimir's type of dependence can be basically regarded as a need to communicate the anxiety of waiting with the other, Estragon depends on Vladimir in a more physical sense. For instance, he is the one who usually needs to be fed (Vladimir gives him a carrot) or in act II, during Vladimir's singing softly, Estragon falls asleep for whom Vladimir takes off his coat and lays it across Estragon's shoulders and he himself then starts to pace up the stage and swing his arms to keep himself warm. When Estragon wakes with a start, Vladimir runs to him and puts his arms around him as a gesture of comfort and affection. On mysterious occasions, Estragon is beaten by certain men when he sleeps alone in the ditch to which Vladimir's response is quite fatherly supportive:

VLADIMIR. No but I do. It's because you don't know how to defend yourself. I

Wouldn't have let them beat you.

ESTRAGON. You couldn't have stopped them.

VLADIMIR. Why not?

ESTRAGON. There was ten of them.

VLADIMIR. No, I mean before they beat you. I would have stopped you from whatever it was you were doing.

ESTRAGON. I wasn't doing anything.

VLADIMIR. Then why did they beat you?

ESTRAGON. Ah no, Gogo, the truth is there are things that escape you that don't escape me, you must feel it yourself. (Beckett [1954]: 116-117)

Despite their dependence on one another, there is hardly an imposition of assimilation in the sense of absorbing the alterity of the other into the same. In several comical scenes, Estragon's response to his relationship with Vladimir fluctuates between pairing and parting. On the one hand, he feels that this relationship might not get anywhere and as a consequence suggests separation, feeling that they «are not made for the same road» (Beckett [1954]: 47). On the other hand, he shows dependence on Vladimir: «Stay with me!», «You let me go» (Beckett [1954]: 114). Also, when Vladimir states that not even once did he wake up the night before (without Estragon), Estragon remarks that Vladimir perhaps is better off if he (Estragon) is not around. Estragon's emotional response to this external stimulus (Vladimir's peaceful night without him) is then with shock «Happy?». Although it is always Estragon who suggests parting as the Same, he finds it hard to leave and continue without Vladimir as the other. Andrea L. Yates holds that Didi and Gogo without each other «would be looking at a mirror with no reflection» (Yates [2004]: 439). She emphasises that it is such reflection that substantiates their existence. Whether this intersubjective relationship between the two tramps proceeds or dissolves is not certain. However, one certain thing is the amount of freedom and independence the Other essentially possesses to finally decide to stay or part without feeling dominated or controlled:

VLADIMIR: (without anger). It's not certain.

ESTRAGON: No, nothing is certain.

Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon.

VLADIMIR: We can still part, if you think it would be better.

ESTRAGON: It's not worthwhile now.

Silence.

VLADIMIR: No, it's not worthwhile now. (Beckett [1954]: 109)

In either case, Vladimir as the Same does not restrict Estragon's independence or the other way around and that is when this type of distance between the same and the other gives their relationship an ethical shape of independence. If Estragon as the Other does not leave, it is not because he feels restricted, dominated or even compelled by Vladimir, but because he is uncertain of his own parting decision or cannot leave, for he knows Vladimir has always been a support. The relationship between Vladimir and Estragon thus seems less a burdensome connection or an egoistic benefit than a preference to see the other around as a source of mental comfort. Bennett perceives the two's interaction as a productive precinct to pursue meaning. He asserts «now that visiting Godot may be far-fetched

for them, they realise that their lives are meaningful because of their relationship» (Bennett [2011]: 51). Despite their dependence on one another, they are already conscious of the independence they have established their relationship on. This ethical view that «the same and the other at the same time maintain themselves in relationship and absolve [Lévinas's emphasis] themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated» (Lévinas [1961]: 102) seems to properly depict Beckett's two main figures. Of course, it must be emphasized here that Lévinas suggests a relationship within independence and not totally independent.

4. Conclusion

Beckett's most outstanding achievement, to concur with Lawrence Graver, is how he dramatizes the foundation of human condition: «the state of "being there"» (Graver [2004]: 11). She correctly argues that *Waiting for Godot* is to a great degree a play about relationships with its typical separating and coming back together. However, to add an important additional point to Graver's argument, one should say that although their primary goal is to keep their state of being there to ultimately meet Godot, it is the ethical quality of «being there» in relation to the other through cognitive distance that seems to make their state of being there valuable. By restructuring the concept of ethical distance between the same-other relation, we observe that although the failure and misfortune of Beckett's despondent men evoke our deepest sympathy, they remind us that cognitive distance from what there is and always remains outside-of-self in actuality can bring about an ethical relationship with the Other. In this respect, in both Lévinas's philosophical theory and Beckett's dramatic discourse, the ultimate indeterminacy in the Same's subjective cognition and definition of alterity from which cognitive distance emerges is foregrounded. Cognitive distance is shown to play a pivotal role in the precinct of ethics as it safeguards the exteriority of the other from the Same's tendency to totalize what is not I.

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