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Subjects, Worlds, and Ethics

A Phenomenology of Responsibility

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Abstract: The most well-known phenomenologist who has written extensively on the concept of responsibility is undoubtedly Emmanuel Levinas. He posits ethics and responsibility at the heart of phenomenology, claiming that they are the main characteristics of human existence. His far-reaching views on responsibility also extend beyond phenomenology. Levinas' approach is further radicalized by Jacques Derrida, who emphasizes the aporias that render responsibility infinite, even impossible, yet simultaneously inescapable. This essay critiques both conceptualizations and proposes an alternative phenomenology of responsibility found in the work of Jan Patočka. His ideas on responsibility are more realistic, more practical, and can be better substantiated phenomenologically.

Keywords: Levinas, Emmanuel; Derrida, Jacques; Patočka, Jan; deconstruction; metaphysics; asubjective phenomenology; care for the soul; subjectivity.

Introduction

When the question of responsibility is addressed from a phenomenological point of view, the most evident figure to consider is Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that one's responsibility in the ethical relation to other human beings is the most decisive aspect of human existence. All human experiences and actions presuppose and begin with an absolute responsibility for the other human being. This idea is radicalized by Jacques Derrida, who emphasizes the aporias of absolute responsibility as being necessary features of responsibility itself.

In this essay, I shall discuss the origins and justifications of the approaches of Levinas and Derrida and contrast them with another phenomenological approach found in the work of Jan Patočka whose phenomenological notion of responsibility proves to be a strong alternative to several problematic aspects of responsibility in Levinas and Derrida.

Emmanuel Levinas—The Roots of His Idea of Responsibility in His Early Work

Emmanuel Levinas treats ethics and responsibility as the main topics of philosophy. He regards human existence, which he refers to as the self, as first of all determined by its responsibility toward other humans. According to him, the ethical relation between self and other precedes all other questions and topics. What Levinas means by ethics is not a system of principles or a set of practical guidelines; rather, it concerns the domain of metaphysical preconditions for what is usually called ethics—and, in fact, the metaphysical preconditions for everything imaginable. The self-other relation was not an ethical issue for Levinas

from the outset; it only became this in the course of his philosophical development, especially in *Totalité et Infini*. Therefore, for a thorough understanding of Levinas' view of responsibility, it is helpful to return to his earlier work, which contains the origins of his influential ideas on the ethical connection between self and other. The following pages will be dedicated to an outline of the development of Levinas' main ideas in his first publications, where one can also find the roots of the problematic aspects of his views on responsibility. Subsequently, I shall return to the concept of responsibility.

In the late 1940s, Levinas published two short books: *De l'existence à l'existant* and *Le temps et l'autre*. In these two works, Levinas developed his early existential phenomenology and his own version of existentialism. In the first book, one can notice how Levinas' later idea of a separation between self and other is preceded by the notion of a separation between being and human existence.[1] In the second book, which builds on the analyses of the first, the relation between self and other comes to the fore, though not as an ethical relation but as one of eros, fecundity, and fatherhood.[2]

The title of the English translation of *De l'existence à l'existant* obscures an important aspect of Levinas' early existentialism—if not its main purpose: the movement from being in general to a being, from Being to beings, and this means first and foremost, from Being to human beings. Instead of *Existence and Existents*, the title could be more appropriately rendered as *From Existence to the Existent*. Levinas emphasizes the uniqueness of human individual existence, which should not be reduced to the world or to Being. In a style similar to the one in Martin Heidegger's investigations of anxiety and boredom, Levinas begins to explore the subject's relation to its existence and to Being with phenomenological descriptions of fatigue, indolence, and insomnia. These are boundary experiences in which meaningful experiences in the world are interrupted, and existence itself can be revealed as an indication of being without a world. Levinas writes about fatigue as an experience that is not tied to any specific object or situation in the world, but as a fatigue of existence itself. Weariness and indolence are moods by which one relates to oneself, taking on one's own existence as a burden, in which one takes possession of oneself.

Levinas distinguishes three themes that cannot appear as phenomena yet are presupposed in all phenomenal experiences, namely, human existence, the world, and Being. The world itself is not a phenomenon, but the coherence of all phenomena. This coherence is brought forth by the subject. Levinas describes this with the metaphor of light. Phenomena appear as correlates of subjective intentions, in the light of the world, which has its origin in the subject. Levinas advances the thesis in the words:

> What comes from the outside illuminated is comprehended, that is, comes from ourselves. [*EE* 40]

In some of his articulations of this reduction, hesitation seems to slip into Levinas' text, suggesting that the reduction of phenomena to someone cannot be adequately justified in phenomenological descriptions. Levinas elaborates:

> The miracle of light is the essence of thought: due to the light an object, while coming from without, is already ours in the horizon which precedes it; it comes from an exterior already apprehended and comes into being as though it came from us, as though commanded by our freedom. [*EE* 41]

Notice the double "as though" in this quotation. Levinas wants to understand the objects of perception and thought as dominated by the subject, but has to admit that they come from outside the subject. In the context of an ontology in the Heideggerian style, Levinas thus adheres to a Husserlian view of the relation between humans and the world: the world is reduced to human beings for whom things in the world appear. Edmund Husserl argues for this reduction by way of his thought experiment of world annihilation: if one were to imagine that all structures of the world disappear, then there would still be a subjective consciousness with experiences.[3]

However, when Levinas conducts the same thought experiment, the outcome is different. In

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001. [Henceforth cited as *EE*]

[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, transl. Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 1987, pp. 29-94, here pp. 84-94. [Henceforth cited as *TO*]

[3] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, transl. F. Kersten, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1982, § 49, pp. 109-12, here p. 110.

Levinas' version, the thought experiment describes the imagination that all beings revert into nothingness. Such a reverting would be an event, and nothingness, according to Levinas, would not be truly nothing, but rather an emptiness occurs. Instead of a reduction of the world to subjective consciousness, the experiment leads Levinas to an anonymous being without any beings, which he calls *il y a* (there is). He details this in the following words:

> Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting into nothingness. One cannot put this return to nothingness outside of all events. But what of this nothingness itself? Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness...This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable "consummation" of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*. The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is "being in general." [*EE* 51-2]

The *il y a* is unnamable and indeterminable. It is beyond experience and therefore resists any phenomenological analysis. Hence, its meaninglessness can only be experienced indirectly as an interruption of the meaningful appearances of phenomena in the world. Levinas characterizes it as "horror of darkness" and "different forms of night" (*EE* 54).

The separation of this anonymous Being and the human being, between existence and the existent, is the main subject matter of *De l'existence à l'existant*. For Levinas, the human being is an existent of its own; it takes a position both within and against Being. Within the meaningless murmuring of Being, the existent is like a cessation, that is, an event that changes from a verb into a noun, a coagulation that Levinas calls a hypostasis. Verbatim he refers to

> the transmutation, within the pure event of being, of an event into a substantive—a hypostasis. [*EE* 71]

In several passages, Levinas characterizes this hypostasis as a "pure beginning" (*EE* 78), as an origin of itself. In other passages, he speaks of it in terms of a creation out of nothing, a *creatio ex nihilo*, that must be immediately accepted by what has been created (*EE* 2).

Since there is no experience of this hypostasis, it is hard, if not impossible, to detect it in a phenomenological analysis of human experiences. Nevertheless, Levinas attempts to approach it in his descriptions of insomnia and wakefulness. In the horrible night of the il y a, one can have the disturbing experience of insomnia, like an "impersonal 'consciousness'" (*EE* 63), a boundary experience in which the subject loses itself, yet in which it also, what is as such an experience of loss, finds itself again. Insomnia is therefore an experience that allows access to the position the human existent has created for itself, before any consciousness, as well as before its place in the world (*EE* 64). The human being, although participating as existence in Being, is also radically separated from Being. In order to defend itself against the meaninglessness and horror of the *il y a*, the existent builds a world in which it is free and safe. In this world, the subject is itself the source of meaning of everything that appears for the subject.

The other side of this freedom is that the subject is alone in its own world. Since everything that appears in this world is constituted by the intentionality of the subject itself, the human existent in fact only encounters itself. It is confronted with itself at every instant and can only bear its own existence: "The world and light are solitude" (*EE* 85).

Is there a way to escape from this solitude? Levinas' second short book, *Le temps et l'autre*, is dedicated to an analysis of a way out. It goes via the other human being, who happens to be not entirely reducible to my world, my intentionality, and my meaning. However, Levinas does not yet frame the relation to the other as an ethical relation, as a responsibility.

In his early work, the connection to the other is characterized as an erotic relation, which, from a distinctly masculine perspective, is described by Levinas as follows:

> It is not possible to grasp the alterity of the other... the plane of *eros* allows us to see that the other *par excellence* is the feminine, through which a world behind the scenes prolongs the world. [*EE* 86]

Levinas is looking for an otherness that is in no way affected by the relations by which it is connected with a subject and its world. The other can only appear as other by withdrawing from its appearance. This paradoxical feature of otherness is what Levinas finds in the "mystery of the feminine" (*TO* 86). He describes the erotic relation with the other as neither one of power, grasping, or knowing the other, nor as a fusion. The erotic relation happens to me, without me having thereby any control over the other. In this relation, the other remains other (*TO* 85-8).

Levinas is even more interested in a possible outcome of an erotic relationship: fecundity.

Parenthood is understood by Levinas as a continuation of the self in the other, again a paradoxical relationship that contests the usual features of human existence. And again, Levinas describes this from an explicitly masculine perspective:

> How can the ego become other to itself? This can happen only in one way: through paternity. Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is myself; the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me. [*TO* 91]

> Paternity is not simply the renewal of the father in the son and the father's merger with him, it is also the father's exteriority in relation to the son, a pluralist existing. [*TO* 92]

In Levinas' early work, one can thus see him begin positing a separation between Being and the human being. Being human implies a uniqueness that cannot be reduced to the indefinite and meaningless being of the *il y a*. The separated human being creates one's own world, which is entirely reduced to the subject and the subject's conscious states. Additionally, this solipsistic being and its solitary world need to be disrupted by an otherness, which Levinas finds in the erotic relationship with the feminine other, in fecundity, and in fatherhood.

However, his phenomenological justification of this approach is not without its flaws. The phenomenological analyses of weariness and wakefulness do not convincingly demonstrate the separation of the human being that Levinas attempts to reveal. They are more like illustrations that can be taken to support his statements. Fatigue can be phenomenologically analyzed as the struggle of bearing existence as such, but it does not support the radical separation between anonymous Being and its existents. Insomnia can be phenomenologically described as a paradoxical experience of self-loss and self-regaining, yet that does not show how this self would be a standstill in an anonymous murmuring of the *il y a*. Being a parent himself, Levinas argues that parents can see something of themselves in their children. Still, he does not explain how this could be experienced as remaining oneself in the other. Moreover, his description of this relation is not established as a phenomenological analysis. His view of the relation between self and world is problematic as well, since according to him, objects in the world can be understood only by reducing them to the light of subjective intentionality. However, he admits that such a reduction cannot be clearly demonstrated. Phenomena come to us as though they came from us, as though one's freedom commanded them.

The same problem can be found in the descriptions of the connections between subject and world in Levinas' main work, *Totalité et Infini*.[4] These connections are analyzed in the section "Interiority and Economy" (*TI* 109-83). In many phenomenological descriptions, human existence and its relations to the world are portrayed as relations of dependency; that is, human relations are dependent on the world, which then gives rise to dominance and reduction, whereby humans constitute and dominate their world. Such a transformation can be noticed at several levels of existence that Levinas describes, moving from basic pre-reflective experience to conceptual thought: enjoying the elemental, dwelling in a home, working, and thinking.

The pre-reflective and as yet undetermined elemental parts of one's experiences—earth, wind, sky, and air—surround the human being, who is dependent upon them, lives from them, yet then, ultimately, dominates them. For Levinas, this domination is

> not a mastery on the one hand and a dependence on the other, but a mastery in this dependence. This is perhaps the very definition of complacency and pleasure. *Living from*...is the dependency that turns into sovereignty, into happiness—essentially egoist. [*TI* 114]

This sovereignty becomes clearer in the relations of dwelling and work. Humans can be free and independent in their own house—where the feminine other is, again, an intimate other. Through work, the subject actively relates to its environment and can dominate it. The highest form of independence can be found in thinking, where the subject also constitutes its object. Levinas writes:

> Intelligibility, characterized by clarity, is a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes. This mastery is total and as though creative. [*TI* 123-4]

On the one hand, Levinas describes the economy of the self as a reduction of all that appears to the subject, a

[4] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969. [Henceforth cited as *TI*]

reduction that is completed in knowledge. On the other hand, he depicts this reduction as an idealistic illusion, since it must presuppose the dependency on the otherness of the elements. Nevertheless, this illusion is possible due to the subject's separation. Levinas explains:

> Representation is conditioned. Its transcendental pretension is constantly belied by the life that is already implanted in the being representation claims to constitute...That representation is conditioned by life...—that idealism is an eternal temptation—results from the very event of separation. [*TI* 169]

Illusion or not, the separation of the subject and his mastery over the world, in which he is, consequently, doomed to be solitary, is a cornerstone of Levinas' philosophy. He needs this separation of the self as well as the enclosure of the world, as a totality, which has to be disrupted by the other, by the infinite. One's relation to the other cannot be grasped by intentionality and leads beyond any phenomenological analysis. The other interrupts the subject's life in its own world and, as an absolute other, creates an entirely different relation of responsibility.

All meaning and significance that can be found in relations in the world are temporary and vulnerable. They can be contaminated and even destroyed by the horrible experiences of the *il y a*. Relating to the absolute other interrupts all these dominating yet vulnerable and solitary connections and establishes an infinite ethical relation of responsibility, as well as an infinite source of meaning. For Levinas, the face of the other cannot be known by me; it is "present in its refusal to be contained" (*TI* 194). It escapes the reach of my intentionality as it infinitely withdraws from its phenomenal appearance and transcends the world in its appearance. This infinity of the face of the other is

> the primordial *expression*, is the first word: "you shall not commit murder." [*TI* 199]

The other human being can never be entirely reduced to me in relations of power or knowledge. I cannot conquer or dominate that human, yet I must respond. The other makes me responsible, and in this relation lies the ultimate meaning of all that appears. The fruit that I live from can be given to the other. The house in which I live makes it possible for me to be hospitable to the other. This absolute and infinite responsibility is also an infinite source of meaning.

The relation to the other is absolute and irreducible; it is "a relation whose terms do not form a totality" (*TI* 39), in other words, it is a relation of two absolutes. The idea of such a relation not only challenges the rules of logic, but it also leads beyond phenomenology. Just as the *il y a* and the hypostasis could not be described phenomenologically, the face of the other, retreating from its own appearance, remains ungraspable to subjective intentionality, and thus also for phenomenological analysis. This is one of the reasons the subject must respond and be responsible, rather than merely understanding and controlling the other.

Levinas insists that this is a one-sided relation: the ethical call of the other transcends any interest, right, or claim on my side. I am responsible for the other before, and without any expectation of the other's responsibility for me. There is no reciprocity in the ethical relation of responsibility.

In my reading, the exact meaning of the face of the other cannot be understood. Furthermore, there is no clear or definite ethical message. The message is the assertion that one is responsible for the other; it does not guide or specify what one is indeed supposed to do. The so-called Levinasian ethics, therefore, is not really an ethics; rather, it is what Derrida calls "ethicity," the transcendental condition of the possibility of ethics.[5] In Levinas' own terms, it is metaphysical exteriority (*TI* 29).

Both Levinas and Derrida hold the position that the connection between ethicity and ethics is ambivalent too. Ethics cannot be based on definite principles, for then it would be part of a system that subsumes absolute alterity under a general term, thereby reducing otherness to the self. It is precisely the lack of such a foundation, the disruptive appearance of the face of the other, that makes one responsible. In addition, no one is confronted with just one other; there is always a third, another other, to whom I am also responsible. The third interlocutor forces one to compare and to calculate, that is, to compare the incomparable and to calculate the incalculable. One must balance the various responsibilities to different others. This is the real source of ethics and politics. Given the many others, humans require general norms, rules, legal systems, and political arrangements. But then the face of the other subverts these systems and

[5] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, transl. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1988, p. 122. [Henceforth cited as *LI*]

their rules and procedures again and again, for they can never do complete justice to the unique needs of any given other. In short, Levinasian ethicity contains an ambivalent condition of possibility of ethics and politics, making both possible by disrupting them and by claiming absolute responsibility. For Levinas, as previously argued, absolute responsibility is generated by the other's withdrawing appearance.

The problematic aspects found in Levinas' early publications return in his main work, *Totality and Infinity*. In the phenomenological descriptions of enjoying the elements, dwelling, work, and cognition, there appears to be a mutual interaction between subject and world, which Levinas then reinterprets as a relation of reduction and domination. None of his phenomenological analyses support such a reduction of the world to the subject as an economy of the self, nor do they uphold a radical separation between subject and world. This means that separation and reduction are imposed on the descriptions as a dogmatic imposition, moving the argumentation toward a position of metaphysical dualism that lacks phenomenological warrant.

In *Totality and Infinity*, this dualism of, on the one hand, the human subject and its world, and, on the other hand, the meaningless *il y a*, turns out to be a vantage point for another dualism, namely, the one between the subject and the other, the Self and the Other. Paradoxically, within this dualism, the ethical relation to the other is, according to Levinas, the one metaphysical origin of all meaning.

Much criticism has been levelled against this position. For instance, Levinas cannot convincingly explain why it is only the human other who makes one responsible, yet not another animal or another thing. In addition, many critics have problems with the asymmetry of the relation to the other, where Levinas seems to leave no space for a responsibility of the other to the self or for a reciprocity between self and other.

These problematic aspects of Levinas' philosophy stem from a lack of phenomenological argumentation. The ethical meaning that comes from the transcendent face of the other cannot be sustained through a phenomenological analysis. Levinas explicitly states that the face of the other interrupts all intentionality and understanding on the part of the subject. The other derives its ethical meaning from its otherness, by withdrawing from its own appearance, as well as from philosophical reflection. This leads ethicity, which constitutes the core of Levinas' philosophy, beyond phenomenology. Therefore, a phenomenological justification of the ethical relation to the other cannot be provided. From a phenomenological point of view, due to the lack of argumentative justification, Levinas' metaphysics exhibits a problematic, dogmatic side. In other words, Levinas imposes a dualistic framework on his phenomenological analyses that is not supported by these analyses and is even contradicted by them. From a phenomenological point of view, metaphysical claims that cannot be sustained by phenomenological descriptions or argumentation and that seem to be taken for granted are called dogmatic.

In his early publication on Levinas' work, *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida also hints at this lack of phenomenological justification in Levinas' ethics.[6] He shows the tension between Levinas' idea of a single origin of meaning and the dualism that emerges in his phenomenological descriptions. He deconstructs the metaphysical origin of the face of the other by analyzing how this face is dependent on one's intentionality, or, in Heideggerian terms, one's being-with. The other needs the world of either the transcendental subject (Husserl) or of *Dasein* (Heidegger) in order to have a world that can be interrupted and opened up by a withdrawing appearance of the other's face.

As I have discussed elsewhere, Levinas' phenomenology of responsibility is not convincing, for it lacks phenomenological rigor and instead imposes a metaphysical dogmatism on its phenomenological analyses.[7] Derrida seems to point out this problem in his deconstruction of Levinas' metaphysics, yet he does not aim at a phenomenological solution.

Jacques Derrida—The Radicalization of Levinas' Idea of Responsibility

Rather than seeking a better phenomenology of ethics and responsibility, Derrida radicalizes Levinas' philosophy of ethical difference. The interruption caused

[6] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, transl. Alan Bass, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1978, pp. 79-153. [Henceforth cited as *VM*]

[7] Eddo Evink, "Metaphysics in Phenomenology: Levinas and the 'Theological Turn'," in *Debating Levinas' Legacy*, eds. Andris Breitling, Chris Bremmers, Arthur Cools, Leiden, NL: Brill 2015, pp. 127-143.

by the paradoxical appearance of the singularity of the other human being is replaced by deconstruction itself. Whereas Levinas' other disrupts the totality of the human-dominated world, Derrida's deconstructions of many philosophical texts lay bare the workings of what he identifies as *différance*, which has always already disrupted the totalitarian tendencies of conceptual thinking. In this context, *différance* is to be understood as a structural movement or tension in language and in every appearance that compromises what it makes possible.

Derrida portrays Levinas' metaphysics as a position beyond traditional metaphysics. Traditional metaphysics is the eternal quest for an absolute presence, foundation, or origin, a pursuit that Friedrich Nietzsche and Heidegger profoundly problematized. While Heidegger tried to replace this metaphysics with a new thinking of Being or ontology, Levinas opposes his philosophy to Heidegger as a metaphysics of ethical difference. In Levinas, the lack of presence interpreted as the ethical call of the other is the ultimate and infinite origin of responsibility and of all meaning. Derrida, in turn, deconstructs all these positions: Neither God nor any other absolute presence, nor Heidegger's Being, nor Levinas' Other can function as an absolute point of reference. What remains of this metaphysical tradition is, in Derrida's view, a "community of the question" (*VM* 80), which keeps philosophical questions open. This means that the question itself must remain. This is both a necessity and a task. The task implies, according to Derrida, an "unbreachable responsibility" for all thinking (*VM* 80).

The question that now arises is: Where does this responsibility originate? Several lines of argumentation lead Derrida's philosophy to an infinite and unbreachable responsibility. First of all, Derrida's deconstructions always reveal the aporias that are inherent in every effort to understand and conceptualize the world humans live in. Every conceptualization is based on presuppositions within a conceptual framework, which implies a metaphysical foundation and ordering. Such a framework, however, cannot be as firm as it often presents itself, since the language—as well as non-linguistic contexts—in which it is articulated bears the uncertainties and fluctuations that inevitably come with contextuality. All concepts and languages function within unstable networks that are both generated and limited by the movements of *différance*.

Différance, thus, is the condition of the possibility and impossibility of all meaning. The relations and differences among the elements of a semiotic network make the meaning of concepts possible; however, because this meaning depends on its contexts, it is flexible and uncertain. An ultimate meaning is therefore always deferred. This is how *différance* makes meaning possible while, in the same movement, it makes a definite meaning impossible. Derrida uses many terms for this enabling and disrupting movement; words such as iterability, iteration, the quasi-transcendental, dehiscence, the messianic, and many more:

> Dehiscence (like iterability) limits what it makes possible, while rendering its rigor and purity impossible. [*LI* 59]

This has consequences for human responsibility, which always implies giving an account of one's choices and of oneself. Such an account should not only try to justify decisions with a reference to ethical rules and guidelines. The justification cannot take these rules or their principles for granted, since they also have their historicity and contextuality. An ethical account, thus, must argue not only for a specific application of a rule but also for the rule itself and its foundations. However, because the rules and principles can never be entirely solid and fixed, the justification cannot be completed. Accountability and responsibility are thus infinite.[8]

Furthermore, beyond the rational account of moral choices and decisions, deconstruction has an ethical purport in itself. By destabilizing conceptual constructions, it opens them up for new opportunities and incalculable events. In this context, Derrida often underscores the openness to the other that is created by *différance* and deconstruction. He calls this *l'invention de l'autre*, "letting the other come."[9]

Parallel to Levinas' thought, the totalizing tendency inherent in conceptual thinking is countered

[8] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundations of Authority'," transl. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, New York, NY: Routledge 2002, pp. 228-98, here pp. 251-2. [Henceforth cited as *FL*]

[9] Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Invention of the Other," transl. Catherine Porter, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2007, p. 1-47, here p. 39.

by deconstruction, which makes room for the other—for what did not yet fit into the frameworks, procedures, and theories. Just as in the philosophy of Levinas, ethics and responsibility are dependent on the tension between general validity and the singularity or alterity that do not fit in. If everything could be understood through and grounded in a general metaphysical system, then any decision would be calculable and predictable, and ethical and legal decisions could be made by a machine. Ethical responsibility is thus dependent on its own limits and failures.

In Derrida's earlier work, the endless deferral by *différance* is connected with the impossibility of any metaphysical presence or origin. The final and definite articulation of such a presence is always delayed by *différance*. In his later work, *différance* not only has the effect of destabilizing constructions but is also connected to the promise of justice. In line with the temporality of *différance*, this justice is not a clear goal, not a future presence, but the uncertain imminence of what might happen at any moment. This is the ethical purport that is inherent in *différance* and deconstruction, and that endows the human subject with moral responsibility (*FL* 251-8).

In another line of argumentation, Derrida remains close to Levinas and elaborates on the idea of an infinite responsibility for the other. The otherness of the other interrupts every system, procedure, and construction and thus constitutes a call to be addressed. Derrida even radicalizes Levinas' notion of responsibility by broadening it to all kinds of alterity. Whereas Levinas restricts responsibility to human relations, Derrida argues that humans are not only responsible for other humans but also for animals, things, and, in fact, everything.

In addition, the ordering of different responsibilities also cannot be determined in perpetuity. Derrida explores this with the famous adage *tout autre est tout autre*, or "every other (one) is every (bit) other."[10] Since being completely different means, indeed, being completely different, the "every other" might be God, the neighbor, a pet, an insect, a text, or anything else. The point is that, according to Derrida, no responsibility (for God, for my daughter) can be definitively placed above another responsibility (for my cat, for any random cat or child anywhere in the world). We need general rules, legal procedures, and political systems, but they can never be entirely justified. Every responsible decision, therefore, cannot but mean the sacrifice other possible decisions. The daily care for my cat entails sacrificing thousands of children whom I do not feed.

Levinas' absolute responsibility is thus extended and radicalized to enormous proportions. The aporia between the singularity of the other and the ordering of any situation, as well as the aporia between my finite existence and infinite responsibility, constitute the possibility, limits, and failures of responsibility. An important aspect of this responsibility, in Derrida's view, is that it needs to remain imperfect, since every idea of a clear conscience would result in utter irresponsibility. In other words, the aporias render a purely good decision impossible and thus render responsibility both possible and impossible. The experience of aporia is a necessary condition of possibility for a responsible moral decision.[11]

In his reflections on the aporias of responsibility, Derrida describes responsibility as an important element of the European identity. This identity, however, needs to be expanded to include openness to other cultures, thereby shifting European responsibility toward a global one. In other texts, he criticizes the European dominance in discussions of global issues such as globalization or human rights.

Like Levinas' idea of responsibility, Derrida's alternative is not without criticism. It is even more radical and unbearable than Levinas' responsibility. The main problem with Derrida's philosophy is that it is still marked by problematic traces of the metaphysics it claims to undermine. As has just been explained, the movements of *différance*—differing and deferring—make any meaning and appearance possible but make the purity of the same meaning and appearance impossible. Traditional metaphysics, such as the one proposed by Plato, Descartes, or Husserl, tried to control these movements by anchoring them in a stable foundation or origin. These efforts, however, are doomed to fail because the meaning of words and of phenomena can never be fixed due to their inherent contextuality. The same words and phenomena can have different meanings and different effects in different contexts. The ultimate meaning, therefore, that traditional metaphysics

[10] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, transl. David Wills, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 2008, p. 82.

[11] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, transl. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1993, pp. 14-20.

aims for is infinitely deferred. The temporization of *différance* is, on the one hand, a direction toward an absolute presence of meaning, and on the other hand, the unavoidable failure to arrive at such a presence for the reference to this presence will always remain a suspension. Derrida elaborates:

> *Différer* in this sense is to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of "desire" or "will," and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect.[12]

The temporization of deferral keeps every conceptualization and even every attempt at understanding in an extreme tension between the absolute and the singular, the infinite and the finite. Derrida denies every nuance of this tension. In his later work, which gives greater attention for ethics, politics, and religion, and for justice and the messianic, the deferral of *différance* results in a striving for justice that cannot be understood as a future presence yet must be anticipated as an unpredictable event and an incalculable surprise. Every definition or description of justice or the messianic is, for Derrida, problematic, as it diminishes openness to the other.[13] This approach can achieve nothing but the erosion of any notion of justice or responsibility. Consequently, the actual effect of deconstruction can only be adverse as every positive description of justice is suspected of excluding alterity.

Paradoxically, Derrida's philosophy of difference results in a problematic indifference: if all others are equal, then ethical responsibility for any of the others becomes indifferent. If all determinations of justice are wrong because they are allegedly totalizing, then all efforts to determine justice will be indifferent to justice. Responsibility and justice turn into the opposite of a pure metaphysical origin or *telos*—as it was their position in Levinas' philosophy—since they cannot be distinguished from their others.

Another paradoxical effect is that Derrida's extreme idea of responsibility paralyzes the human subject. If my responsibility is this radical, then there is nothing good that I can do, which may make me either completely desperate—because I will always fail—or, again, indifferent—because if all my decisions are wrong anyway, why should I bother in the first place?

These paradoxical and unintended effects are consequences of the temporal characteristics of *différance*, the infinite deferral of an ultimate and definite meaning. But why is this movement of postponement related to an ultimate and definite meaning? Or, in a slightly different formulation, if it is not just a meaning or phenomenon that is made impossible by *différance*, but its rigor and purity, why then is *différance* a necessary and inevitable condition of (im)possibility?

The temporality of *différance* makes it transparent that, although Derrida explicitly does not aim for a metaphysical foundation or telos, the metaphysical quest for purity still haunts his philosophical work. Deconstruction and *différance* do their disrupting work within the metaphysical project of the search for an absolute principle. Every effort to reach such a principle appears to be in deconstruction. Yet, Derrida accepts the metaphysical striving or desire as a necessary trait of philosophy. Deconstruction and différance, therefore, keep this project going by dismantling every metaphysical figure, again and again, while keeping the metaphysical question intact. Metaphysics is not dead; it stays alive while all its mortal results are undermined. In this way, metaphysics and deconstruction sustain one another, as they are interdependent.

For Derrida, this is not a choice but a necessity. He insists that conceptual analysis needs a rigorous binary all-or-nothing logic:

> Every concept that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative of "all or nothing"...It is impossible or illegitimate to form a *philosophical concept* outside this logic of all or nothing. [*LI* 116-7]

Derrida does not oppose anything against this necessity, but supplements it from within, with another necessity, namely that there can never be such a pure principle.

These alleged necessities, however, are not as necessary as Derrida claims them to be. Conceptual distinctions do presuppose a structured framework of references and concepts that can be analyzed down to their most basic presuppositions. However, this does not imply that they can function only in

[12] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," transl. Alan Bass, in *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1982, pp. 1-27, here p. 8.

[13] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, transl. Peggy Kamuf, New York, NY: Routledge 1994, pp. 33, 68-9, 72-4, 81-2, 92-5, 210-2.

an ultimate tension between pure presence and impossibility. It is always possible to discuss concepts on a metaphysical level, but it is not necessary. And even on a metaphysical level, the binary logic of conceptual oppositions with a totalizing grip on its objects is not the only possible one. An alternative to it will be sketched in the next section.

In short, the metaphysical quest for purity still haunts Derrida, but solely in an inverted manner. This stretches his concept of responsibility to extremes that ultimately risk producing the opposite of what responsibility is meant to be: the aforementioned indifference and paralysis.

Jan Patočka—An Alternative Phenomenology of Responsibility

By removing the dogmatic veil that Levinas has cast over his phenomenological analyses of "living from," work, and dwelling, one can discern relations of interaction between subject and world. Even the most basic layers of this experience, such as enjoying the elements, manifest a world in which the subject is immersed. This is evidently much closer to Heidegger's being-in-the-world than to Husserl's reduction of the world to consciousness.

Yet more compelling accounts of the relations between humans and their world can be found in the work of Levinas' contemporaries, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eugen Fink, and Jan Patočka. Next, I will focus on the Czech phenomenologist Patočka. He remained faithful to a profound elaboration of Husserl's phenomenological method while arriving at quite different results with it. In Husserl, the phenomenological reduction leads to the field of—subjective and intersubjective—consciousness in which all phenomena occur. According to Patočka, however, the phenomenological reduction uncovers a different field of appearing: It does indeed exhibit that everything appears to me, and to other humans, and that there is no other access to things in the world than through a subject's experience, or the subjective experience of each human. Yet this is only a part of the field of appearance, as what appears reveals itself within contexts. Nothing can appear outside of a context. Therefore, human life and consciousness, to whom the phenomena appear, cannot help but understand itself as part of such a context, for it can only appear to itself within contexts.

In phenomenological terms, this means that what appears can only appear within a horizon. The I of the subject is, according to Patočka, also a horizon that participates in other—natural, social, and cultural—horizons. It does not appear as a phenomenon but as a half-phenomenon, as the broader realm in which things manifest themselves. The horizon of our field of vision, the metaphorical horizon of time and culture, the I, and also the eye of the subject, cannot themselves appear as things but solely as frameworks and vantage points that remain partly hidden. Patočka follows Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of the human body as a pre-reflective relation to the world, within which all conscious experiences are rooted. Humans experience the world through their bodies, and they also experience their bodies as objects, yet they do not control them. The body is what humans are, what they have, and what, in part, remains alien and undisclosed to them. This means that the human body can, accordingly, also be understood as a horizon.[14]

Human subjectivity and consciousness thus participate in the field of appearing, but certainly do not control or dominate this field. On the contrary, Patočka calls this field of appearances the world, which encompasses all subjectivity. The world is the field of appearing that organizes subjectivities as the centers around which phenomena show themselves. On the one hand, the subjective perspectives are indispensable elements of this phenomenological field: my personal experiences are the only gateway to all the phenomena. On the other hand, these perspectives themselves do not appear as the center or origin of the universe. Humans experience themselves as participating in many contexts, in a larger world. Like other phenomena, the subject is embedded in horizons of structures that profoundly determine its existence. Since the subject does not entirely coincide with the world as the field of appearing but only participates in it, Patočka even speaks of an "asubjective phenomenology."[15]

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[14] Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, transl. Erazim Kohák, Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing 1998, pp. 29-68. [Henceforth cited as *BC*]

[15] Jan Patočka, "Husserl's Subjectivism and the Call for an Asubjective Phenomenology," in *Asubjective Phenomenology: Jan Patočka's Project in the Broader Context of his Work*, eds. Ľubica Učník, Ivan Chvatík, and Anita Williams, Nordhausen, DE: Verlag Traugott Bautz 2015, pp. 17–40.

The subordinate or secondary position of human subjectivity does not make it less important. Patočka gives much attention to the specific role of human existence in the phenomenological field. One can even speak of his own version of existentialism. Human freedom plays an important role in his existential phenomenology. Humans decide—among many other factors—how things appear. Phenomena come to the attention of humans with a call to human concern, a call to be taken care of. In Patočka's view, the relation of humans to the world is a relation of surrender, devotion, and dedication. Humans are dependent on the world and give their share to keep it turning (*BC* 57-67).

Here, one can find the kernel of a phenomenological idea of responsibility. Humans are responsible for the role they play in letting phenomena appear, in letting things be, and in making the world function. Everything humans do constitutes a response to the call of phenomena, to the call of the world. This call that makes humans responsible does not come from a radical alterity outside the world, but from the world itself and all phenomena within it. The place of humans in the world and their way of being is a matter of responding.

This phenomenology of responsibility is elaborated on in Patočka's descriptions of human existence as forms of movement. He distinguishes three levels of the interaction of humans and the world, all of which should be understood as dynamic movements in which surrender and dedication take shape.[16] The first movement expresses human dependence: humans are rooted or anchored in the natural and cultural world. Being accepted and being kept alive is an inevitable precondition for survival and for all other human actions and experiences. The second movement is more active, a reaching out to the world, in work, cooperation, or conflict, in order to stay alive and make a living. These two movements can operate within a world that is given and taken for granted, with self-evident structures, standard procedures, and an unquestioned worldview. The third movement is a movement of self-reflection that questions the world and its very existence. This critical, reflective stance, which no longer takes the world for granted, is, according to Patočka, the beginning of philosophy, history, and politics. Society and culture now appear as traditional constructions that might be different. Human choices do not simply coincide with standard actions but play an important role in shaping the way humans live together. Once the usual and traditional ways of living and thinking are questioned, once the foundations of the world are shaken, there is no way back to an innocent origin or to the world as it was before it was questioned. The human perspective appears to be finite. There is no position from which humans can survey the entire world or their own existence. As soon as the world is fundamentally questioned, this questioning cannot be undone. Since the worldviews and ways of life are no longer self-evident, humans need to give an account of their choices, their way of life, and the constitution of their selves. Such accounts are necessary precisely because it has become apparent that they can no longer be legitimized once and for all. In this third movement, human responsibility becomes self-conscious.

Such consciously taking on one's responsibility is what Patočka calls "the care of the soul" or "living in truth."[17] For him, these two concepts are closely related: the third movement of human life coincides with the beginning of history, coincides with the beginning of philosophy, and coincides with the beginning of the care of the soul; this is what defines human beings. But it is not simply a given human condition he has in mind. In line with Patočka's views, world and history have precedence in relation to the individual subject; and, in line with his dynamic view of human existence as always in movement, a life in truth partly depends on the social and historical circumstances in which it is being lived. In other words, the care of the soul has a cultural history.

Patočka distinguishes between several periods in the history of the care of the soul in European culture.[18] This history starts in ancient Greece with the development of the third movement of human existence, the movement of breakthrough or truth. After a Greek and a Christian period, the care of the

[16] Jan Patočka, "The Beginning of History," in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, transl. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd, Chicago, IL: Open Court 1996, pp. 27-51, here pp. 29-40. [Henceforth cited as *HE*]

[17] Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, transl. Petr Lom, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2002, pp. 71-130.

[18] Jan Patočka, "Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?," in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, transl. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd, Chicago, IL: Open Court 1996, pp. 95–118.

soul declined in early modernity, as in modern culture a new rationality emerged that is more concerned with a care to have than a care to be. He writes:

> The great turning point in the life of western Europe appears to be the sixteenth century. From that time on another motif comes to the fore, opposing the motif of the care of the soul and coming to dominate one area after another, politics, economics, faith, and science, transforming them in a new style. Not a care *for the soul*, the care to *be*, but rather the care to *have*, care for the external world and its conquest, becomes the dominant concern.[19]

This modern rationality of control and calculation has increasingly dominated modern European culture and has unleashed immense technical forces that have led to the demise of Europe in two devastating world wars. Human responsibility has fallen out of sight structurally through its reduction to controllable situations. This view of modern European culture has much in common with Heidegger's characterization of modernity and modern technology as *Gestell*, or framing. As a consequence, human reason is no longer engaged in an ethical life of responsibility but has become instrumental reason, concerned with calculating domination of its environment, in service of human self-interest, which can, however, easily turn against human interests and against humanity as such. This has led to a culture of meaninglessness, decadence, and war.[20]

An important goal of Patočka's thought is to reawaken human beings' care of the soul, which involves living a responsible life in truth and reason. While meeting this demand might always be possible, it is admittedly not an easy task. It calls for moral decisions and an ethical disposition that runs counter to modern culture, for it asks for dissidence. This comes with a sacrifice that cannot be understood within the calculating measures taken by modern economic and political culture—on both sides of the political divide of Patočka's time, in both the East and the West.[21]

According to Patočka, this reawakening of attentiveness to the soul includes a reconsideration of the Idea of Europe as a global idea of responsibility, thereby widening the originally European idea of responsibility into a global perspective, into a global responsibility.

Responsibility is thus, in Patočka's view, a necessary and fundamental aspect of human life. Humans cannot help but respond to the phenomena that appear in the relations between humans and the world. This responsibility becomes explicit in the third movement of human life, when humans experience the need to give an account of their ideas, decisions, and actions. The source of this responsibility cannot be found in the relation to others that are beyond the world or in the aporia between an absolute and singular other and its being embedded in the world. Responsibility is always inner-worldly, related to specific worldly contexts, while it is at the same time related to an infinity of the world that cannot be surveyed. Therefore, a proper understanding of human responsibility presupposes insight into the position of human life in the phenomenal field of appearing, which makes humans responsible in relation to the phenomena that appear to humans. Hence, responsibility is not rooted in a transcendence of otherness beyond the world or in an absolute tension between call and context, but rather in inner-worldly relations that are constitutive for everything that appears, including humans themselves.

Comparison of the Three Philosophers

Patočka's phenomenology of responsibility shares several similarities with the views of Levinas and Derrida. All three philosophers value human life as a mandate for upholding responsibility, as a response to a general call. In Levinas by this general call is meant the human other appears as a call to be recognized as human, as other—this is presupposed by everything the subject may do as a response such as taking action, having perceptions, or engaging in denial. In all three approaches, traditional metaphysics is replaced by a philosophy of difference. Responsibility is conceived in the context of the absence of an all-controlling

[19] Jan Patočka, "Europe and the European Heritage until the End of the Nineteenth Century," in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, transl. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd, Chicago, IL: Open Court 1996, pp. 79–94, here p. 83.

[20] Jan Patočka, "Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War," in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, transl. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd, Chicago, IL: Open Court 1996, pp. 119–37.

[21] Jan Patočka, "Séminaire sur l'ère technique," transl. Erika Abrams, in *Liberté et sacrifice: Ecrits politiques*, Grenoble, FR: Jérôme Million 1990, pp. 277-324.

foundation or principle. Precisely because of this absence, decisions are never entirely calculable; they are in need of reasonable argumentation that takes unique situations and singular persons into account. There is an infinity inherent in this conception of responsibility. It is never easily achievable by merely following a few rules. The choice of the rules and their application in specific circumstances needs to be justified as well.

Does this correspondence between the three lines of thought imply an endless and absolute responsibility that burdens the subject with an inevitable and unbearable guilt? It is at this point that the differences come to the fore between Levinas and Derrida, on one hand, and Patočka, on the other, come to the fore.

The main difference between their positions lies in their phenomenological understanding of the relation between humans and the world. In Levinas, the world is reduced to the intentionality of a subject that reduces all otherness to the economy of the self. Derrida also recognizes in all knowledge a reduction or exclusion of alterity. Totality and difference are always entangled in a problematic and all-pervasive tension. The call to responsibility comes from the interruption and breakdown of worldly connections by an absolute other. This view, however, cannot be sustained by phenomenological research. Levinas' analyses point to a different connection between human subjects and the world, namely, to interaction rather than to a reduction versus absolute alterity. Nevertheless, he interprets these insights on a metaphysical level between self and other. In both Levinas and Derrida, traces of traditional metaphysics turn responsibility into an absolute tension between self and other, between calculation and the impossible. In other words, according to Levinas and Derrida, all human knowledge and action are violent to the other, by reducing the other to the world of the self (Levinas) or to a calculating system (Derrida). The call of the other, however, interrupts this world and thus makes humans responsible. In turn, every response to this call constitutes yet again a reduction of otherness. It is this tension that makes responsibility infinite and impossible to fulfill.

In contrast, Patočka's phenomenology is very different. His analyses evidence how humans are always situated and embedded in the world. Consequently, human responsibility is also situated, and it is not absolutely infinite. Responsibility may be infinite in the sense that it is included in all human experiences, and therefore humans need to deal with it in an on-going manner, yet it is not absolute, as if it were coming from an alterity beyond any situation. Responsibility is both a being called and an existential response to such a call—but a call issuing from within the world, not from outside of it—which includes freedom, the ability to choose, situational insight, and reasonableness. This situatedness makes it possible to make meaningful distinctions among several kinds of responsibility: personal and collective, organizational, professional, direct and indirect, global and local, legal and moral responsibility, and so on. Such practical applications and elaborations are not possible within the approaches conceived by Levinas and Derrida, who get stuck at a metaphysical level in absolute tensions.

The difference between calculation and reasonableness, between following rules and giving an account of rules, is also historically situated in Patočka, namely, in modernity, rather than absolutized, as in Levinas and Derrida. One might argue against the specific historical argumentation advanced in Patočka, but that is a minor detail, a matter of nuance, instead of an overarching issue.

The situatedness makes Patočka's idea of responsibility practical and bearable rather than one-sided, absolute, and impossible, as in Levinas and Derrida. And contrary to what Levinas and Derrida might suggest, Patočka's responsibility is not easy, as it may require the making of difficult choices. This is what responsibility is: practical, yet not easy.