

Chinnery, A. & Bai, H. (2008). *Levinas and responsibility*. In D. Egea-Kuehne (Ed.), *Levinas and education* (pp. 228–241). London: Routledge.

## Justice in the Name of the Other: Levinas on Rights and Responsibility

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**Abstract:** In contrast to the prevailing modernist conception of ethics, wherein responsibility toward others is seen as the necessary cost one has to bear in exchange for the right to pursue individual self-interest, Levinas calls into question the claim to a natural drive toward self-interest and individual freedom. He argues instead that our basic condition, or “ethical nature,” is a commitment to the rights of the other person. However, in order to understand Levinas’s inversion of the traditional model, it is important to understand the backdrop against which it stands. In this chapter, we begin by unpacking the traditional Western view of rights and responsibility, drawing especially on the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. We then discuss Levinas’s approach to rights and responsibility, and, finally, we explore the implications of such a conception for moral education.

### I.

In an age saturated with rights talk, Levinas’s conception of unconditional responsibility for the other is often criticized as being too utopian and impossible to realize. Certainly, if we take this impossibility as an assessment about practicability, we can only agree with the conclusion. But the criticism here is about more than a practical difficulty. What is questioned is the intelligibility of the very notion of unconditional responsibility. How can we deny there being conditions that delimit and direct our responsibility? Responsibilities are particular terms of obligations, and

obligations are contracts one enters into whereby one is required to fulfill specific demands. Moreover, taking responsibility requires one to be in a fit condition of freedom and power to discharge one's obligations. At least this seems to be an unassailable understanding behind our *ordinary* notion of responsibility. However, could there be an *extraordinary*, alternate, notion of responsibility by which we can make Levinas's seemingly unintelligible view of unconditional responsibility intelligible and even compelling?

The quintessential discourse of rights and responsibility belongs to the ideology of individualism that emerged in clear relief in the seventeenth century West, and which marked the inception of modernity. Thus, in asking ourselves whether there could be another account of responsibility that we can appeal to for understanding Levinas, we would do well to examine the foundational ideas behind individualism, which is what we propose to do for the first part of this essay. Particular focuses of this examination are the origin stories of civil society as advanced by the master architects of individualism, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

The origin stories of civil society posit a view of human beings as fundamentally self-interested autonomous individuals who see responsibility to others as a fair cost they have to pay for the good they receive, namely, their right to pursue self-interest. Given this view, society tends rather predictably towards a maximization of rights claims (entitlement) and a minimization of responsibilities (obligation). In other words, this view encourages moral calculus, similar to cost-benefit analysis, wherein one weighs how much responsibility one should assume in proportion to how much benefit one derives from a given person or situation. What we have here, then, is a particular conception of ethics that sees self-interest as the quintessential moral agency and

currency, and its reciprocal pursuit through a system of negotiated exchange the standard of ethical responsibility. When ethics begins from and returns to the self, one's primary project is the establishment and pursuit of one's own individual rights and freedom, and responsibilities simply demarcate the limits to that project. Levinas's notion of unconditional responsibility for the other is a radical departure from this project of modernist individualism, and will therefore become intelligible only within a conception of ethics that rejects the notion that we are fundamentally self-interested autonomous individuals.

But even if we reject the social contract as a sufficient ground for ethical relation, why turn to Levinas? Despite his longstanding influence on Continental thought, it is only fairly recently that Levinas's work has been taken up in British and North American philosophical circles, and even more recently in applied fields such as education. This gap is due in large part to the stronghold of the Anglo-American analytic tradition, a tradition that refused to take seriously the postmodern challenge to sovereign subjectivity and the prevailing metanarratives about truth, scientific progress, and so on. Part of the hesitance in taking up these challenges was a fear that rejecting traditional notions of autonomous selfhood would mean forfeiting moral agency and accountability, and that denying the possibility of objective moral truth would inevitably lead to moral relativism. It has become increasingly clear, however, that the rejection of sovereign subjectivity, by Derrida, Levinas and others, is actually a turn *toward the other* – and thus a turn toward, rather than away from ethics. And since Levinas is the philosopher within that tradition whose work is most explicitly concerned with morality and ethics, it is at least worth considering what he has to say around questions of moral responsibility and, specific to our purposes here, what it might mean to educate in a way that takes those questions seriously. In the pages to

follow, we will begin by unpacking the social contract view of rights and responsibilities. We will then discuss Levinas's approach to rights and responsibilities, drawing implications for the "lived experience" of his ethics; and, finally, we will explore what it might mean to take up a Levinasian conception of rights and responsibilities in education.

## II.

Ogilvy, in his work on individualism and collectivism, characterizes these two 'isms' as ontological, saying that "[t]hey touch the very root of what it is to be a human being" (1992: 218). For individualism, "the individual is the fundamental ontological unit, the alpha and omega of social philosophy" (ibid.). In other words, individuals are the social atoms – the irreducible building blocks of society. What is irreducible is a closed entity: self-bound, separate, hence, independent and autonomous. Individuals as social atoms do not acquire emergent properties that will radically alter their self-identity through transformative interaction with other beings. Any interaction that occurs between social atoms is external to them and does not change their essential properties and identities. Tightly bound to itself, a social atom exists unto itself and for itself. It lives out of self-interest and lives for self-interest. Self-interest, therefore, is the prevailing moral agency in individualism.

What brings such autonomous individuals together at all to form a society? What needs do they have of each other? Not surprisingly, the need they have of each other is to better serve their own self-interest. Society serves as a means to the end of individuals fulfilling their self-interested projects. As we shall see shortly, the individualist ontology that privileges self-interest and sees

society as a means to this end clearly forms the foundation of the origin stories of civil society as told by the progenitors of social contract theory: Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

We will start with Thomas Hobbes's picture of human nature that has set the decisive stage for the theory of social contract in the West. In his famous (or, we are tempted to say, infamous) chapter in *Leviathan, Of the Naturall Condition of Mankind, as concerning their Felicity, and Misery*, Hobbes pictures human beings as equal in want and natural ability, which, when combined with the fact of a natural scarcity of provisions necessary for life, leads to the war "of every man, against every man" (1651/1964: 84). Violence becomes the chief method for securing, through invasion, profit, safety, and reputation; and human life, thus depicted by Hobbes, is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (ibid: 85).

What save humans from the miserable life in the state of Nature are their fear of death and the faculty of reason that can calculate what needs to be done to avoid misery and death. Thus are born "Naturall Lawes" and "Contracts" – rules to which individuals agree to submit so as to secure their safety and pursuit of self-interest. For Hobbes, "lawes" (*Lex*) means obligations. Obligations are imposed on individuals in exchange for their "rights" (*Jus*), the liberty to pursue self-interest. In his starkest view of individualist ontology, Hobbes sees individuals as having sovereign status, and therefore having a right to anything, even to another's body! In theory we all have the absolute freedom to pursue what our interest dictates. Such are our entitlements or rights. However, in practice, we cannot have everyone freely and equally pursuing his or her rights claims, for it will lead to conflict and war. Given that, there have to be some ways to limit or even, at times, take away individuals' rights. Social contracts are the solution. Rational

individuals realize that if they are to pursue their self-interest, they have to mutually agree upon some rules of conduct whereby they limit their claims of self-interest, and conditionally support others' pursuit of their self-interest. However, because Hobbes sees human nature as unreservedly brutal and totally selfish, he considers it necessary to have a strong authoritarian government that strictly enforces social contracts amongst individuals. Only the fear of death and punishment may sufficiently discourage individuals from violating social contracts.

John Locke, another seventeenth century supporter of the social contract theory, presents a slightly more benign picture of human nature than Hobbes's. Unlike Hobbes, Locke believes that individuals are born with a ready disposition toward society. This sociable disposition rests upon the fundamental "equality of men by nature. . . so evident in itself, and beyond all question. . . [is] the foundation of that obligation to mutual love amongst men. . ." (Yolton 1977: 278). But what does equality have to do with the disposition toward society? To explain this, Locke uses Hooker (1554-1600) who basically rephrases the Golden Rule that says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That is: if you want x, want to pursue it but need others' support, then you are obliged to support others pursuing the same. Note that the thesis of equality plays a crucial role in establishing a social contract of exchange between what one is obliged to do for others and what one claims from others for support. It is by virtue of seeing that others are equal, same, or similar to oneself that one feels obliged to fulfill others' needs and demands that are similar to one's own. This idea that the perception of equality or symmetry between the self and the other is a precondition for the exercise of responsibility to others is ethically problematic in a world marked more by difference than similarity. When similarity becomes the guiding motivation behind ethical responsibility, the purview of ethical responsibility is narrowed

because we will exclude from our responsibility those who appear different and foreign. We will fail to recognize radically different others as deserving our ethical responsibility. We will be taking up this critical point later in the section on Levinas.

The idea of equality that Locke invokes as self-evident also forms the foundation of Rousseau's conception of social contract. In his famous first line of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau declares: "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains" (1762/1968: 49). A few lines later, he adds: "... born free and equal, surrender their freedom only when they see advantage in doing so" (ibid.). For Rousseau, human beings, born inherently equal and free, become the opposite through contact with society's corrupting influences, including, principally, pursuits of property. The unequal spread of talents and skills amongst human beings inevitably shows up when they compete for possessions, and leads to an inequality of wealth and status. And the stage is thus set for interpersonal, interracial, and international conflict and war.

Rousseau does not advocate a complete withdrawal from society, even if such were possible, to protect oneself from its corrupting influences. Some amount of strategic withdrawal would be recommended, as when we are dealing with the education of our young before the age of reason and discrimination – the strategy that Rousseau demonstrates in *Emile* (1762/1979). For Rousseau, even though corrupting societies are everywhere and are more of a rule than an exception, human beings improve only when they leave the state of nature and enter civil society. He states:

The passing from the state of nature to the civil society produces a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked. It is only then, when the voice of duty has taken the place of physical impulse, and right that of desire, that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study his inclinations. (1762/1968: 64)

Now there is a lot that can be said, and has been said, about the comparison of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau for their varied conceptions of social contract.<sup>1</sup> But for our purposes here, we are most interested in the fact that these three progenitors of the modern social contract theory start off with this tenet: that human beings enter civil society by social contract, that is, by individuals' voluntary agreement to give up some of their pre-endowed, "inalienable" rights and take up civic obligations in exchange for better self-advantage. This belief is founded upon the stark distinction they draw between the state of "savage" nature and the state of civic culture, between the natural or instinctual and the moral, and, of course, between self and others. All three philosophers subscribe to the idea that there is a pre-socialization stage for human beings, individually and collectively. In this pre-socialized, pre-moral or immoral stage, an individual is pictured to be a solitary, disembedded social atom, unmarked by contingencies and connections.

But how viable is this notion of disembedded individuals? Are we ever born free and equal? Can we ever be social atoms? Can we ever be divested of contingent differences and encumbering connections? The answer to each of these questions has to be a clear, unhesitating No. No human being, not even the "wolf-child," is born outside the inexhaustible fold of contingencies and

interconnections that make and mark us unequal and encumbered, for better or for worse. Even before we are born, human beings are always and already social beings, deeply embedded in the thickest web of contingencies in terms of genetic endowments and circumstantial conditions such as wealth, status, health, education, and social, cultural, political, and religious beliefs and practices. It is these contingencies that land each of us in a uniquely tilted life trajectory in terms of personal constitutions and material circumstances, and render us asymmetric and heteronomous from the earliest moment. We may wish for and work towards a greater degree of symmetry and autonomy, but this is an altogether different agendum, with different motivations and purposes, than the one that takes equality and autonomy as an inherent human attribute, and which is a social myth. But how is it that, of all people, the three pre-eminent philosophers whose ideas of social contract we examined here were taken by the myth of equality and freedom? We cannot answer this question here in a biographically accurate way. Yet, in grappling with this question in a more general way, we may see how the logic of social contract fits in with the individualist ontology.

### III.

The initial postulation that human beings are equal and free social atoms whose conduct is motivated by self-interest delimits their interpersonal relationships to an exchange mode. Exchanges are what equals do out of self-interest. The social logic that prevails is: I give you x for your x-equivalent, and you can do the same, and I will oblige you. To exchange one's x for another's y that is not equivalent to x is to negate, and possibly damage, one's self-interest. One is disadvantaging oneself. And for the individualist, self-interest is what human conduct is all about. It often figures both as the ultimate motivation and as the purpose of all conduct. Thus the

*right* thing to do in any circumstance is to pursue self-interest. In other words, we are *entitled* to pursue terms and objects of our self-interest. They become our *rights*, and we demand their fulfillment.

Suppose we notice, to our consternation, that we are not equal in endowment and circumstances. We also notice that we are so embedded in our web of connection that we are not free to act as autonomous beings. We find ourselves encumbered and compromised; some of us much more so than others. The crucial question we should ask is this: Since equality (or symmetry) and freedom (or autonomy) are the membership requirements for participation in the mode of exchange, what about those who are unequally endowed and are restricted in autonomy? The answer seems rather obvious. Those without the requirements for membership are necessarily marginalized. This lack of participation takes the form of not being able to make one's needs and interests known and demanding requisite attention and support, and also not being able to take up responsibilities that would advantage one to be in a suitable position for the reciprocal exchange of obligations and benefits. Conversely, to take up responsibilities that do not add to one's self-interest in some way is not the thing to do for a rational individualist. A rational individual carefully calculates the kind and extent of responsibility one should take to yield maximum benefit to oneself. But again we ask: What about all those around us who do not behave like these rational individuals? By birth or by circumstance, they do not have equal resources and abilities to work the exchange system of rights and responsibility. We are indeed everywhere surrounded by people who cannot fully participate in this contractual system of exchange: marginalized, powerless, and defenseless people for reasons of social and economic status, gender, age, race, abilities, health, education, and so on. In our social contract based system,

there is little room for these marginalized others. They cloud our self-interested projects, and appear only as burdens and “the most awesome of stumbling-blocks on the self’s march to fulfillment” (Bauman 1993: 84).

But a justice worthy of its name is surely not intended only for the powerful. In fact, we would argue that our primary obligation ought to be to the weak and powerless – or, as Levinas would say, the widow, orphan, and stranger. On Levinas’s view, this fundamental obligation to the other is aroused neither by adherence to a social contract, nor by appeal to moral principles or the pursuit of virtue, but rather by the somewhat paradoxical command of what he calls the “beggar’s request” (1961/1969: 232-3). In other words, one is called to respond not by the force of a powerful counter-ego, but by the vulnerability and fragility of the other.

#### IV.

In this section we will look more closely at how thinking about rights and responsibilities shifts when we are speaking from a Levinasian perspective. In a nutshell, Levinas claims that if one redefines responsibility as a positive response to the appeal of the other, one has a new basis for justice and human rights. To pursue justice on this account is to pursue the rights of the other (1974/1981: 145-6). Much has been written elsewhere about Levinas’s conception of subjectivity as pre-ontological intersubjectivity (that is to say, being for-the-other prior to being for-oneself), so we will not take up that notion in detail here. What is important for our purposes, however, is his insistence on heteronomy and asymmetry as defining characteristics of the ethical subject and ethical relation – a marked departure, as we mentioned above, from the traditional emphasis on autonomy and reciprocity. Levinas calls into question the claim to a natural drive toward self-

interest and individual freedom, arguing instead that our basic condition, or ethical nature, if you will, is a “peaceful commitment to the rights of the other person” (Burggraeve 2002: 42). He therefore denies that his is a prescriptive ethics, preferring to call it a description or recuperation of the “real, but forgotten” conditions of human experience and existence. His construal of subjectivity and the ethical relation revolves around notions of heteronomy, asymmetry, passivity, inescapability, and impossibility, but we will take up just two of those conditions here: heteronomy and asymmetry.

For Levinas, subjectivity is best described in ethical rather than ontological language. The ‘essence’ (if one can use such a word) of the self, on his view, is to be a subject in the accusative: not “I think, or, I will, I want, I can,” but *me voici* (Levinas 1974/1981: 142).<sup>ii</sup> From the standpoint of traditional Western metaphysics, however, Levinas’s position cannot hold, for it posits subjectivity as an apparently negative ‘construct’ – as a break with, or deliverance from, Being itself (Ciaramelli 1991: 88). In contrast, for Levinas, humanness cannot be defined by autonomy: selfhood is at the most fundamental level a reply, a response to the appeal of the other; and individual subjectivity is bound inescapably to the ethical priority of the other:

The ethical ‘I’ is subjectivity precisely insofar as it kneels before the other, sacrificing its own liberty to the more primordial call of the other. For me, the freedom of the subject is not the highest or primary value. The heteronomy of our response to the human other, or to God as the absolutely other, precedes the autonomy of our subjective freedom. (in Levinas & Kearney 1986: 27)

Now it might seem here that Levinas is not really talking about subjectivity at all, but rather that he is arguing for a forfeiture of subjectivity and agency. On his view, one is defined as a subject – a singular person, an ‘I’ – precisely because one is exposed to the other and abdicates one’s position of centrality in favor of the other (ibid.: 26-27). And he uses heteronomy to describe the radical kind of openness to the other which, on a traditional account, is the very antithesis of moral agency. As Gaylin and Jennings point out, when individualism is the ontological ground and autonomy the moral ideal, “relationships come to be seen as encroachments, disciplined activity as a straight-jacket confining self-expression, and duties as millstones around one’s neck” (1996: 212). However, as we will see below, a rejection of the traditional emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy leads neither to a necessary forfeiture of subjectivity, nor to slave morality.<sup>iii</sup> Rather, we are opened to the possibility of what Levinas calls “heteronomous freedom” – a view of freedom and rights that is made possible only by investing one’s own freedom in the freedom and rights of the other.

The notion of heteronomous freedom highlights the metaphysical violence and injustice of an ethics that maintains the priority of self over other and insists on reducing the other to the same, whereas Levinas insists that justice is about affirming and promoting the rights of the other *as other*. By elevating the ethical significance of difference over similarity, however, he also calls into question one of the fundamental tenets of rights-based ethics – that is, the shared condition of being human as the moral bedrock, the foundation for universal rights. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on essential similarity, Levinas rejects the appeal to sameness, declaring instead that the other cannot be known by the usual categories of perception. Rather, he says, we must find “another kinship” – one that enables us to conceive of the difference between oneself

and the other in a way that preserves the other's alterity and resists oppression and subsumption of any kind (1974/1981).

When human rights are taken to be the bedrock of morality, the emphasis is on a conception of the self as a bearer of rights. Human beings have rights simply by virtue of being human, and are, in a significant sense, only able to flourish or become fully human by exercising their rights. For Levinas, on the other hand, it is responsibility and not rights, that forms the bedrock of what it means to be fully human. "It might astonish some," he says, "that – faced with so many unleashed forces, so many violent and voracious acts that fill our history, our societies and our souls – I should turn to the *I-Thou* or the responsibility-of-one-person-for-the-other to find the categories of the Human" (1993: 42).

In rights-based ethics, universal human rights are unalienable – they cannot be taken from us – and they are morally binding regardless of civil law. To most of us, this notion of basic human rights sounds like common sense, as does the notion of a common humanity as the starting point for moral theory around rights and responsibilities. Levinas disturbs that notion, however. He insists that it is not our similarity as human beings that needs to be upheld and affirmed, but our difference. Consequently, both our rights and our responsibilities are bound up in respecting and affirming the other *as other*, not as one who is, in all important respects, essentially "like me." For Levinas, rights begin with our responsibility to and for the other, not with the self; and the significance of this shift becomes no more clear than in the case of racism. As Roger Burggraeve puts it:

For Levinas, the essence of racism consists in accepting only what is the ‘same,’ and excluding what is different, or ‘foreign.’ The ‘other’ is found threatening and therefore ruled out. The only sort of otherness found acceptable is the otherness *within* one’s own ‘genre’ or ‘type’ – the otherness within one’s own blood or soil, one’s own family, origin, nation, church, club or society, the same job, place, birthplace or birthdate. One accepts only differences and particularities within a same genre, which means that individuals within that genre differ only relatively (e.g., by character, taste and intellectual level). It also means that their deeper kinships and relationships are not touched in any way by their differences. ...Levinas’s perspective allows us to see that Hitlerism and its genocidal crimes is only a quantitative expansion – that is, a consequent, systematic and inexorable expression – of racism in its pure form, which in turn is only a concretization of the *conatus essendi*.... (2002: 59-60)

Levinas challenges much of what has become almost conventional wisdom – that is, that perceiving the other as a fellow human being despite contingent differences is the essential ingredient for moral perception and moral performance: he resists any appeal to sameness, even in its thinnest (hence most inclusive) sense.

The second, and perhaps more controversial, of the two aspects we will focus on here is asymmetry. In contrast both to social contract theory, which assumes an exchange between equals, and to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of intersubjectivity, the most fundamental intersubjective relationship for Levinas is not one of similarity or symmetry, but of radical *asymmetry*: “The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my

rights” (Levinas 1974/1981: 159). Now, there is nothing inherently new or radical in a claim to asymmetry as such. In fact, since the prevailing conception of ethics is founded on the modernist notion of subjectivity as sovereign rational autonomy, ethics has been characterized by a self-other asymmetry all along. But Levinas inverts the prevailing model and insists on the ethical priority or superiority of the Other. Asymmetry for Levinas is what marks the ‘fundamental’ or ‘essential’ difference in which the “I” is already subject *to* the Other.

In other words, when responsibility is seen as a precondition for subjectivity, the “I which says I” is a subject position “already deposited of its kingdom of identity and substance, already in debt” to and for the other (Levinas 1975/1996: 144). It is an inversion of the traditional “no other-than-self without a self” to “no self without another who summons it to responsibility” – a shift from subjectivity as an “I” to a “me” (Ricoeur, cited in Kemp 1996: 46). As Peperzak explains, for Levinas:

The ethical relationship cannot be limited to a practice that is based on the conviction that all humans are equal in having basic rights, being citizens of democratic institutions, members of one human race. ...The Other comes from ‘on high,’ is superior to me, not necessarily, of course, in the sense of superior intelligence, skills, talents, virtues or holiness, but as a human existence that, in its poverty and needs, surprises and inevitably obligates me. The relation revealed in any encounter is a relation of *inequality* and height, a relation of asymmetry. The appearance of another in the world, which is also mine, reveals to me that I am a servant, responsible for this Other’s life and destiny. (1997: 23)

Contrast this to the notions of exchange and reciprocity, so central to the social contract framework we discussed above. Lawrence Becker, for example, argues for reciprocity (construed as both the disposition to reciprocate and the acts such a disposition makes obligatory) as a fundamental virtue. Specifically, he proposes that “we should return good for good, in proportion to what we receive; that we should resist evil, but not do evil in return; that we should make reparation for the harm we do; and that we should be disposed to do those things as a matter of moral obligation” (1986: 4). As Becker makes clear, in traditional ethics, moral obligation rests on and takes as its referent the prior actions of another.

For Levinas, however, reciprocity cannot be an ethical consideration. When asked in an interview with Philippe Nemo, “But is not the Other also responsible in my regard?”, Levinas replies, “Perhaps, but that is *his* affair. ... I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it” (Levinas 1982/1985: 98). And in *Otherwise than Being*, he claims:

The knot of subjectivity consists in going to the other without concerning oneself with his movement toward me. Or, more exactly, it consists in approaching in such a way that, over and beyond all reciprocal relations that do not fail to get set up between me and the neighbor, I have always taken one step more toward him – which is possible only if this step is responsibility. ... Without asking myself: What then is it to me? Where does he get his right to command? What have I done to be from the start in debt? (1974/1981: 85, 87)

On Levinas's view, then, the fundamental asymmetry of the ethical relation is the kind of asymmetry Dostoyevsky points to in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others" (quoted in Levinas 1982/1985: 101).

With such exorbitant claims, even those who are sympathetic to Levinas's ethics in theory find it difficult to imagine what it would look like in practice, and his work is therefore often discredited as being entirely utopian and unrealistic. However, as Levinas himself makes clear, "its being utopian does not prevent it from investing our everyday actions of generosity or goodwill towards the other: even the smallest and most commonplace gestures, such as saying 'after you' as we sit at the dinner table or walk through a door, bear witness to the ethical" (in Levinas and Kearney 1986: 32). The asymmetry of the ethical relation means that one fulfills one's own freedom by investing it in the freedom and rights of the other; that one pursues human rights by pursuing the rights of the other; and that one sees one's very subjectivity as always already constituted by responsibility to and for the other – the stranger, the widow, and orphan.

V.

That said, however, it is not immediately evident why we ought to take up such a notion of rights and responsibilities in education. Many educators today express concern over the current proliferation of individual rights at the expense of social responsibility; however, we do not believe that drawing up a more rigorous social contract – a prevailing trend in moral education – will bring about significant change in the desired direction of social justice and compassion. As we suggested above in our discussion of social contracts, the prevailing conception of moral agency is so deeply mired in self-interest that it cannot suffice as either the starting point or the

measuring stick for moral education. Once one becomes aware of the extent of suffering in the world today, one can no longer rest content with educating students to pursue self-interest to the extent that they do not interfere with the rights of others to pursue their own interests. We need a far more robust sense of social and global responsibility, and that, in turn, requires a fundamentally other-regarding conception of selfhood and moral agency – a conception not unlike Levinas's.

However, we cannot get very far in contemplating a Levinasian “approach” to moral education before running into another apparent paradox – and one which marks one of its most notable differences from traditional conceptions wherein responsibility is just one part of an economy of rights and responsibilities. For Levinas, the ethical debt one owes to the other increases in the measure that it is assumed: “duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished” (1961/1969: 244).

Contrast this to the traditional framework wherein “ought implies can” (Williams 1985: 175). Moral obligation on this latter account means that the agent ought (morally) to do something, but in order for the obligation to hold, what ought to be done must be within the agent's power. Now, as Williams notes, the question of what is within the agent's power is a contested and problematic notion, as is the requirement of non-conflicting obligations, but the salient point for our purposes here is that traditional conceptions of moral responsibility hold the agent responsible only for that which he or she can (reasonably) do. And, for the purposes of moral education, this is an entirely workable stance.

Being for-the-other, on the other hand, means moving away from the comforting security of the known and the possible. It means risking the comfort of being for-oneself for the insecurity of responsibility to and for the other. In contrast to the neat parameters of a rule-based morality, the incessant demand to be for-the-other can seem, in Bauman's words, "vague, confused and confusing..." (1993: 80). One can never be sure that one's interpretation of the situation has matched the demand: "I have done this, but could I not do more? There is no convention, no rule to draw the boundary of my duty, to offer peace of mind in exchange for my consent never to trespass" (ibid.). We can recognize morality, Bauman says, by its "gnawing sense of unfulfilledness, by its endemic dissatisfaction with itself. *The moral self is always haunted by the suspicion that it is not moral enough*" (ibid.).

But how could fostering a "gnawing sense of unfulfilledness" be seen as a desirable aim for moral education? Could it not lead to a rather widespread moral paralysis – with students simply throwing up their hands in despair? Not necessarily. While that response indeed remains a possibility, it is not inevitable; nor should we expect it to be the typical response. It is entirely consistent, on our view, to foster at once a strong sense of moral agency and a deep sense of humility. The measure of a moral life need not be the fulfillment of one's own self-interested desires and ends, nor the fulfillment of a pre-determined set of duties. Rather, why not aim towards a capacity to welcome the unexpected and unknown; a willingness to suspend one's own projects in order that another might flourish? In other words, if we reframe the criteria for what constitutes a moral life, desirable ends outside the traditional emphasis on rational autonomy come into view.

The inherent impossibility of ethics, as Levinas describes it, need not be seen as a condition to be overcome. To talk of fulfillable, finite responsibility, Derrida says, is akin to talking of finite love. If one were to answer the question, “Do you love me?” by saying, “Well, yes, up to a point, and within certain limits, within reason, I do,” then it is not love (in Caputo 2000: 120). Even though I will never be able to fulfill the obligation contained in the other’s claim on me, its impossibility does not release me from the obligation. A rule-based morality might tell me where my duty starts and where it ends, and thus allow me to say at some point that I have done what needs to be done, but Levinas’s ethics offers no such reassurance. It resists absolutes, and it resists absolution. Infinite responsibility is an uncertainty with no exit; but it is also, for Levinas (as for Bauman and Derrida) the very foundation of morality. Just as we can never say with regard to love, “It is over; I have loved enough,” we can never, with good conscience, congratulate ourselves for having discharged our responsibilities (ibid.).

To speak of rights and responsibility after Levinas therefore requires both a new ethical language and new frameworks for practice. However, it is a challenge worth taking up, we suggest, and an opportunity, as Peperzak (1997) says, to investigate whether we are in fact capable of the dispositions required for such radical other-centeredness, or whether our incapacity to do so is reason enough to declare Levinas’s conception exaggerated and unreal. In this essay, we have done our own investigation and come to the positive conclusion that Levinas’s conception of unconditional responsibility becomes both intelligible and practicable if we move beyond the exchange model of human relationship. But being able to practice Levinasian responsibility does not mean being able to fulfill it. Since there are no conditions attached to the terms of responsibility, it is by definition impossible to fulfill. However, in the current global context, we

can no longer rest content with grounding moral education in social contracts or other variations of the Golden Rule. Responsible citizenship requires that we suspend not only our own self-interested desires, but also our self-referential frameworks. We are called to a responsibility to and for the other that does not rest on perceived similarity or on the possibility of our undergoing similar suffering. As educators, therefore, we must rise to the challenge to foster in both our students and ourselves the kind of moral agency that recognizes and affirms the other *as other*, and the attendant capacity to live in, and with, the uncertainty – indeed the impossibility – of ethics.

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<sup>i</sup> See, e.g., Cranston's comments in his Introduction to Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1968: 25-43).

<sup>ii</sup> The preferred translation of *me voici* in Levinas's ethics is "Here I am" (see, e.g., Peperzak 1997), but this translation can be somewhat misleading. While *me voici* is in the accusative case in French, it does not come through as such in English. The 'I' in "Here I am" ought, therefore, to be read more like the subjectivity of 'me'.

<sup>iii</sup> We are referring here to Nietzsche's notion of slave morality, in which virtues would be determined as if by the violated, oppressed, and unfree. Within such a conception, Nietzsche claims, what would be valued would be those qualities of utility which would serve to "ease existence for those who suffer"; and although these qualities (e.g., pity, patience and compassion) are traditionally seen as other-regarding virtues, they are, for Nietzsche, not virtues at all, but rather signs of a weakened and decadent humanity. For more on this see especially *Beyond good and evil* (1886/1966).

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