

A New Sense of Responsibility? A Levinasian Ecology of Religious Sentiment

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to look at the manner in which the philosophical ethics of Emmanuel Levinas can be brought into dialogue with environmental ethics and animal rights. Though his work has often been seen as being at odds with environmental concerns in general, I wish to highlight a basic portraiture of what Levinas' ethics of responsibility and substitution might look like within such a context and to point out the deep resonance which his work has with other recent philosophical attempts to develop similar lines of environmental responsibility. In the end, this essay tries to point such Levinasian insights *beyond* Levinas' own approach and toward a reckoning with a more 'object oriented' approach to our most fundamental ethical concerns today. Though this presentation will certainly challenge the standard Levinasian division between moral subjects and their objects, such reasoning, it is argued, is beneficial not only for ethical quandaries, but also for re-conceiving the nature of the human-being in its interconnectedness to the environment around it.

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Introduction

One of the more difficult things to explain within our contemporary global context is why environmental groups and the (very worthy) causes they support can often inspire devotion in their followers comparable to religious belief. From Greenpeace activists to Earth Day celebrations and from those who adhere to some form of the Gaia hypothesis to eco-feminist theorists, defenders of the planet earth have done little more than proliferate over the last several decades, demonstrating their increased relevance and also something profoundly insightful concerning the very nature of their existence.

At the same time, the field of ethics in general has had to incorporate these evolving viewpoints on the planet earth and its interconnected inhabitants, expanding its focus well beyond the typical norms of human relations and into more complicated terrain involving human-animal relations as well as concerns about the ecosphere as a whole. One place in which such ethical shifts are notably discernable is with regard to our revaluations of what it means to be *responsible*, as it is this concept in particular that has subtly expanded its hold over us to include taking responsibility for things once considered purely as 'objects' in relation to human 'subjects'. Whereas humanity once saw itself as purely dominant over the planet's material world of animals, plants and its other 'resources', things now stand somewhat differently, though exactly what such a difference actually is often remains unclear.

More recently, theorists have begun to put forward a framework for comprehending such social evolutions through a variety of forms of 'object-oriented' thought which have seemingly taken on a life of their own, including such principles as the call for a 'democracy of objects' meant to include all manner of living organisms (or even inert material) within the ongoing debates of our various, global political climates (Bryant). Humanity, from this perspective, is but one collective among a number of interconnected species and material

realities—**one needing to cease maintenance of its anthropocentric view of the world.** Likewise, even our most typical philosophical and theological principles concerning ethical behavior, the nature of responsibility and our ability to care for the 'other' before us have greatly expanded beyond our ability to develop new paradigms for those ethical understandings needed in order to keep pace with such revolutions in thought.

My intention in what follows is simply to demonstrate one such 'expansion' of ethical thought by taking a look at the manner in which the philosophical ethics of Emmanuel Levinas are being brought into dialogue with such environmental concerns. Though his work has often been seen as being at odds with environmental concerns, I wish yet to highlight a basic portraiture of what Levinas' ethics of responsibility might look like within such a context and to point out the deep resonance which his work has with other recent philosophical attempts to develop similar lines of environmental responsibility. In the end, I am aiming to point such Levinasian insights *beyond* Levinas' own approach and toward a reckoning with a more 'object oriented' approach to our most fundamental ethical concerns today. Though this presentation will certainly challenge the standard Levinasian division between moral subjects and their objects, such reasoning, I will further argue, is beneficial not only for ethical quandaries, but also for re-conceiving the nature of the human-being in its interconnectedness to the environment around it—offering perhaps even more profound philosophical, anthropological and even theological insights than we have been willing to embrace thus far.

Substituting the Self for the Earth?

Does an animal have a face? That is, are we to be responsible for the animal that stands (or even *crawls*) before us in the same way that we would otherwise be bound to the human face that stares back at us? Or, in other words, how might we be able to make the transition from feeling a sense of responsibility for the other who is human to

substituting ourselves (the task of the responsible individual) for an animal, a planet or an ecosystem in order to take on responsibility for these precarious 'objects' as well?

For some time now, it has been clear that Levinas' 'system' of thought has its particular philosophical gaps, notably for our purposes, in the manner in which it deals with the non-human other (see Atterton and Calarco, as well as Levinas' interview on animals in Wright, Hughes and Airley). For Levinas, ethics is a product of human relations alone. We are simply bound to the face before us through a demand to be responsible for the other who stares back at us. A profound ethics of *the face* is spelled out by Levinas in order to elucidate the complex relations that are inherent to all human relations. Yet for all of its inventiveness, and for all its affinity with an Infinite 'Other' who resembles a non-human divinity (Cf. Levinas, *Totality*), his ethics is surprisingly void of concern for the non-human other who might resemble an animal, a tree or a rock – or at least his thought *appears* for the most part to be devoid of such claims.

Close readings of his texts, however, have actually given rise more recently to a renewed concern for the non-human other (specifically the animal, but also extended by some to the entire material earth). Such examinations have prompted various theorists to reevaluate his entire ethical edifice in order to expand his notion of responsibility to become more than simply a 'human' ethics (see Atterton and Calarco; Calarco; Davy). If such a maneuver is made, quite profoundly, new avenues of ethical exploration are opened up to us from within his ethical writings, ones that resonate more clearly and deeply with contemporary 'object oriented' paradigms of thought that seek to promote and defend the value of all 'objects' beyond the standard subject/object dichotomy – a dualism itself inherently fraught with hierarchical tensions and false claims to sovereign power (Cf. Agamben). Indeed, these traditional concepts and their accompanying models of transcendent power (i.e. God, King, even the 'human being') have been brought down to our level of existence, to the point that it has become more fashionable, I would suggest, to

refer only to immanent planes of thought and existence rather than rely upon outdated paradigms of sovereign/transcendent claims (Deleuze and Guattari; see also Justacrt).

It has been particularly intriguing as of late to reread Levinas' development of the concept of transcendence as radically opposed to such traditional sovereign claims to power (Cf. Levinas, *Totality* 274-7). As has been argued in the context of Levinas' ultimate contribution to our environmental concerns, there is another sense of transcendence that takes place in Levinas' ethics, *but one that he himself did not necessarily foresee*. What is transcended is actually an anthropocentric view of the world, an overcoming of our human (and very limited) view of ourselves amidst that which lies around us and ultimately grants us life (Davy 47). Such an anthropocentric view in fact was what gave rise to his rigid (moral) subject/object division in the first place. This was, of course, one of Jacques Derrida's basic critiques of Levinas that his limiting of ethical relations to the human alone was a shortsighted project, one that was also secretly undermined from within by Levinas' own position (Derrida, *Animal* 134; Cf. Derrida, *Adieu*), as I hope to further elaborate in what follows.

Transcending language? On the 'limits' of substitution

For the most part, the issue seems to be that Levinas' inquiries into the nature of our interaction with the face before us in reality give rise to a series of difficult to answer questions; ones that Levinas himself failed to give an adequate response to. For example, what can truly be said to express a 'face'? When is a person or an animal truly exposed in their nudity to the other (i.e. when does their 'face' become visible)? What does such an act mean for ethics? And to what extent could an animal be said to utilize language, this (over) privileged medium of ethical interaction upon which our encounter with the face seems at times to be predicated? Indeed, why even favor language in such a way as this? Is there not a relationship beyond language that calls to us and strips us of our privileged status as

linguistic bearers of identity? And could not such a relationship be disclosed as acknowledgeable through Levinas' own work?

Perhaps we would do well to remember that responsibility, in the later Levinas' understanding, is *not* a welcomed event. Rather, we are responsible precisely for what we wished not to be responsible for: for the other before us (Levinas, *Otherwise* 114). It is an anarchic event that goes 'beyond the normal play of action and passion in which the identity of a being is maintained' (114). Indeed, as he will somewhat curtly put it: 'It is on the hither side of the limits of identity' (114). Such a loosening of the bonds of sameness, of having an identity with oneself, cannot but have a deep resonance with those elements of our being that exceed the sense of 'humanity' within us. It is an experience of seeing oneself *as* another, to use Paul Ricoeur's phrasing of the relationship (see Ricoeur). In fact, such an excess could reasonably be referred to as contiguous with the 'nonsense' that exceeds sense and that is more truly the 'rumbling of the *there is* [*il y a*]' – the foundation of our very being *beyond* any essence (163). For Levinas, sense was only possible as it evolved *out of* a nonsense that continuously subverted essence. Indeed, justice was ultimately seen by him to proceed directly from the substitution of the-one-for-the-other that is the act of signification (163). Hence, 'There is ambiguity of sense and non-sense in being, sense turning into non-sense. It cannot be taken lightly' (163). It becomes, in fact, the core of our ethical being, something that, I am arguing, extended in this environmental context beyond Levinas' own articulations.

In a very direct sense, I am here contending that Levinas was unable to offer a more radicalized view of our relations to the environment around us as his thought was too bound to the standard subject/object divisions of an anthropocentric worldview. Hence, he was unable to extend his notion of responsibility to include even more 'passive' forms of life (or perhaps even matter itself) that have historically been subjugated to the desires of the 'moral subject' – those very human beings that have often failed to be responsible for the well being of those numerous 'others' that share in the resources of our planet.

It is perhaps no surprise then that those who feel responsible for the planet earth are capable of equating such an interruption of nonsense into one's life with the interruptions of an ecosystem, for example, into one's daily reality (or the interruption of a divine sovereign being now perceived by many as being solely immanent to our world) (cf. Jantzen). We are continuously interrupted by the flow of natural forces around us that seemingly move both with and against us simultaneously. Though such forces do at times undermine our very essence — the precarious structures of our world that come tumbling down often more easily than we could ever have imagined — they are also the building blocks of our world, the fabric of our lives and of our very bodies. Getting in touch with such an excess of our being can therefore lead directly to a transcendence of our anthropocentric ideals, much as Levinas himself could be said to have foreseen in some sense.

Levinas, in fact, has another word that can be used to describe such a transcendent act: *substitution*, though he restricts its applicability much more than was perhaps allowable. As he puts it quite centrally in his last major work *Otherwise Than Being*, 'The overemphasis of openness is responsibility for the other to the point of substitution, where the for-the-other proper to disclosure, to monstration to the other, turns into the for-the-other proper to responsibility. This is the thesis of the present work' (119). Substitution, for him, is the 'subversion of essence' (162), though it is also that which lies central to the foundations of all ethical praxis. We are only responsible for the other insofar as we are able to envision *substituting ourselves* for the other, an act which Levinas thought to be restricted to humans only, but which seems structurally applicable to any number of 'objects' found within our world.

Such a substitution of the self for the planet or for a particular animal, for example, could easily be imaginable as a replacement of the self for the other, despite the fact that any discernable 'face' for the planet might seem at first glance to be difficult to imagine (though perhaps not altogether impossible) (Cf. Davy). And this is not to say, of course, that a particular animal, tree or rock will reciprocate such an act — in

fact reality might dictate that the opposite will more often than not be the case. *But*, it is however an opening toward the uniqueness of the human *vocation* – if we can call it that – which becomes evident in such an understanding of ethical actions. Our ability to substitute ourselves for a ‘passive’ other speaks loudly to our unique capacity to engage the concept of responsibility on multiple levels, though whether such levels are absolutely restricted to human beings alone is uncertain (and most likely doubtful).

My choice of the word ‘vocation’, burdened as it is with a particular religious sensibility, is not an accidental one, for such a word demonstrates the very *religious* quality of such an ethical formulation, as well as something perhaps of the uniqueness of the human being within such ethical substitutions. As has been well noted by many a theologian working with Levinas’ writings, he turns often to a non-theological religious language in order to more fully describe this substitution of the self for the other (Purcell; De Tavernier, Part I; cf. Bloechl). My conjecture, quite simply, is that such claims as this one made by Levinas on the religious nature of ethics can assist us in comprehending why environmental and animal rights movements inspire something akin to religious fervor among their adherents, as they flow directly from recent trends of movement away from sovereign, transcendent models of relations to more immanent, interconnected ones. Though such a parallel formulation as this one between religions and environmental groups might seem to diminish the long histories and validity of particular religious traditions, it might also ultimately help us to *re-think* the very nature of religious belief.

Such speculative thoughts arise in Levinas’ writing – even if they are ultimately left unresolved – when he struggles to articulate the dualistic divisions that make up the vast landscape of our conceptual reasoning. For example, in consideration of how the (religiously inflected term) *Absolute* intervenes to upend our most ‘essential’ representations, he ponders how the basic coordinates of his ethics connect ‘[...] to what detaches itself absolutely, to the Absolute. The detachment of the Infinite from the thought that seeks to thematize

it and the language that tries to hold it in the said is what we have called *illeity*. One is tempted to call this plot religious; it is not stated in terms of certainty or uncertainty, and does not rest on any positive theology' (Levinas, *Otherwise* 147). A religious dimension is only discernable for him as such within the fundamental bonds between human-beings – in the cracks opened up through the entrance of the Absolute into our essence, and that which brings with it a command to be responsible. He can consequently state that 'It is the trace of a relationship with illeity that no unity of apperception grasps, ordering me to responsibility. This relationship is religion, exceeding the psychology of faith and of the loss of faith. It orders me in an anarchic way, without ever becoming or being made into a presence or a disclosure of a principle' (168). Not concerned with defining any alleged presence beyond what lies before us (hence not concerned with any words to be spoken on such a speculative divinity – the very essence of *theo*-logy), this inscription of the religious as an ethical injunction is bound to the nature of our being, indeed – as Levinas made very clear in numerous places – it *precedes* our being, therefore placing ethics as first philosophy prior to any supposed ontology (Levinas, 'Ontology'). It is already pointed toward a plane of anarchic, immanent thought, though this is not always directly indicated by him as such.

The 'anarchic trauma' that initiates our redemption from the 'violence of non-freedom' (Levinas, *Otherwise* 123) is the source of our sense of responsibility, as unwanted as it may be to us. Hence, the self does not reign over itself as a sovereign ego, as Levinas will put it; its glory does not stem from the glory that typically surrounds the sovereign or an ontotheological God. 'Glorification is saying, that is, a sign given to the other, peace announced to the other, responsibility for the other, to the extent of substitution' (148). It happens in the here and now, a significant religious experience occurring within a purely immanent realm of existence, hence possibly also redefining our most basic understanding of what religious belief is or could be. It also seemingly pushes our understanding of Levinas' work beyond a traditional transcendent and yet anthropocentric worldview and

toward grasping the radical significance of our responsibility for the immanent environment we inhabit alongside so many 'others'.

There is much to discern at work here within these formulations concerning the nature of religion as a series of immanent (atheological) relations between persons. And there is also an openness to the 'thingness' of all 'things' beyond the subject/object dichotomy, a willingness perhaps to substitute oneself for such 'things', even if such an act seems counterintuitive or unreciprocated, or pushes us beyond the contours of Levinas' own formulations. What we are perhaps being led to witness is a profound *rebirth of the religious*, one that need not jettison the particularities of a given religious tradition, but rather open such traditions from within, making them more accessible to the otherness of the 'things' before them, even if such an encounter is a traumatic or unwanted one.

Conclusion: On the logic of (non)sense

The manner in which sense could said to be supported by nonsense, much as Levinas explores their relationship, is a frequently recurring philosophical motif. It can be found, for example—and perhaps registered with even more force—in the writings of Gilles Deleuze, someone for whom such thoughts pointed directly toward an immanent plane of existence (Deleuze and Guattari). For Deleuze, the relationship of sense and nonsense, as with Levinas, opens us up to the relationship(s) between the human and the divine, between sovereignty and weakness and between 'undifferentiated groundlessness and imprisoned singularities' (Deleuze, *Logic* 106). As any diligent reader of Deleuze's work with Félix Guattari could tell us, such logic lay at the heart of their collaborative work and was extended by Guattari at least directly into his taking up of certain environmental causes toward the end of his life (Dosse 383-96).

What these philosophical and very much ethical resonances tell us moreover is that a logic of sense can only be undergirded by a nonsense that lies beneath it, around it, guaranteeing that sense alone will not register itself as a sovereign claim. It will be upstaged,

overthrown and reworked into new forms of sense – ones hopefully more just to the myriad ‘others’ within our world.

Beyond this, however, there is yet another logic of sense that I wish to point us toward, one more enveloping of the call to responsibility that we must face and which too seems to come forth from a Levinasian understanding of our relationship to the other before us. Put simply, I would wager that there is an ethical imperative revealed to us to become, not only responsible, but aware of those who are already faced with such responsibilities and who can offer us insight into the nature of responsibility, its profundity and its practice. Those who are ‘closer’ to the sensibilities of being-responsible, such as the poor who feel their hunger or the woman who feeds the child with her very body – those who feel responsible *with and through* their very bodies in fact – are often made to feel such responsibilities acutely, even beyond their will, to bear it and to work-with it (though such experiences, it must be said, can and often are undertaken willingly as well).

There is a proximity to responsibility that can be disclosed by one’s bodily (i.e. gendered, sexual, phenomenological) being. To confront the nature of responsibility through our bodies and to learn from such an awareness is not to be responsible according to certain preformed social standards of responsibility, as for example, those of a capitalist system which might chastise impoverished persons as financially ‘irresponsible’, or those of a patriarchal society that subjugates women through its labeling (and fundamentally misunderstanding) of women as rationally ‘irresponsible’ beings. Rather, to cultivate a Levinasian responsibility is to adopt a responsibility that responds to the faces of others who too feel their needs exposed to others (with the exposed ‘animals’ standing before us almost first and foremost among them). It is to assert a ‘logic of sense’ as a *logic of sensation* and that leads inevitably toward a greater awareness of responsibility and need – one that is actually the best ‘logic’ in defeating sovereign, hierarchical, anthropocentric or patriarchal claims to power. It is most certainly often seen as a ‘servant mentality’ or a form of weakness, a capitulation to passivity or the reification of persons,

though it is also perhaps the only chance to take a genuine ethical stance that is responsible, or the least bit caring.

Such a logic might also provide a means to get 'in touch' with the raw sensibilities that come from our more 'animalistic' sides (if such a thing could be isolated apart from our linguistic being). From such a vantage point, the senses and the body become the focal point through which responsibility is comprehended, for when one is responsible (or *made to be responsible* in order to account for another's lack of responsibility), one's senses become heightened, or more acute. In the end, if we are to understand how a substitution such as oneself for another who is seemingly wholly other to us and yet comprises something essential of us, we could do much worse than to start with a greater awareness of our own bodily sensations. Indeed, such sensations, no longer ignored, and more fully attended to, might just contain the seeds of a new internal growth, one both natural and yet foreign to the bodies we already inhabit.

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