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## Responsibility

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# Responsibility

Leonard Lawlor

The most tangible reason that philosophers in the twentieth century have devoted themselves to the reformulation of the concept of responsibility lies in the extreme violence of the contemporary **world**. A piece of evidence for this claim lies in the fact that Emmanuel Levinas dedicates his *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* “to the memory of those who were closest to the six million assassinated by the National Socialists” (1981). Levinas is not alone in attempting to rethink responsibility. Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze have also devoted a lot of their thinking to the problem of responsibility (Derrida 1998, 26; Deleuze 1983, 85; Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 108–109). When these philosophers criticize contemporary political and philosophical ideas, the critique frequently calls for others to be responsible, and more responsible. Critique is done in the name of an increased responsibility, perhaps a hyperbolic responsibility.

If we think of tangible suffering, we are able to formulate one principle for the brief investigation into responsibility that follows: what is fundamentally at stake in all recent, philosophical discourses on responsibility is empathy. In fact, empathy is at the root of all the recent, philosophical discourses on alterity. Since Edmund Husserl’s *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, no philosopher has been able to speak of the phenomenon of the other (any sentient being) without relying on the idea of empathy (Husserl

128 1977, 108–120). Empathy is not sympathy. While sympathy is the conscious feeling of the pains of others, empathy is the virtually unconscious feeling of being “paired,” as Husserl says, with others. Empathy is something like an unconscious form of compassion. Even though Husserl is a twentieth century Descartes in regard to the unity of the “I think,” he still places nearly unconscious empathy at the fundamental level of all **experience**. It is this fundamental empathy that requires us to formulate a new or different concept of responsibility, one that is different from the traditional one that we find, for example, in Kant. We shall turn to the distinction between the new and the traditional concepts of responsibility in a moment. But we should note now that critique done in the name of an increased responsibility intensifies the experience of empathy.

The traditional concept of responsibility revolves around the primary, everyday sense of the word “responsibility.” The primary, everyday sense consists in being responsible, that is, taking responsibility for one’s actions. The everyday sense of responsibility appears when we chastise our children, saying, “You made this mess. Who else could be responsible for it?” The everyday sense of “responsibility” essentially depends on the freedom of oneself. In other words, it depends on the Kantian idea of autonomy. Therefore, being responsible for oneself assumes that the subject of responsibility is unified and the self-identical, like the Cartesian “I think.” Only if one is self-identical is one capable of receiving praise or blame for an action. However, with this conception of the self as self-identical, we can see that there is no alterity here, and we can wonder if there could ever be any empathy. So, following so many critiques of the subject in the twentieth century, we must abandon this alterity-less subjectivity, and with it the traditional concept of responsibility. Now, the new concept of responsibility that we are about to outline includes three components: first, a “responsibility to” (others in general); second, a “responsibility for” (others in general); and third, a “responsibility before” (others in general) (Derrida 1997,

250–252). It is “responsibility before” that will return us to the idea of being responsible for oneself, and therefore we shall conclude with a few words on guilt. 129

There are two paths into being “responsible to” others. On the one hand, there is the path of a “deconstruction” of interior monologue (see **Inner Voice**). To simplify what the word “deconstruction” means, one could say that, in deconstruction, one needs to pay attention to what lies under or is implicit in our discourse. Or, one could say that one has to crack open the words of our discourse. In this case, we would need to split open the words of our interior monologue. If one is able to crack open the words, then one hears that the words one uses in all discourse and in particular in interior monologue are words of a natural language, like English, French, or Mandarin Chinese. As words of a language that everyone shares and no one invented, the words refer to other uses of the words and therefore to others. Cracking the words open a little more, one hears the phonemes or the sounds of the words. One hears their arbitrariness and therefore their kinship with animal sounds and even with the rustling of leaves in the wind. In short, one must pay attention to the murmur within or below one’s interior monologue, turning that monologue into a true dialogue. This turns auto-affection into hetero-affection. If one is able to crack the words open this far, then one has to say that the other (even trees), the “hetero,” is in me, in my “auto.” The other in me is a **specter** from which I am unable to avoid or run away from; my very freedom is in jeopardy. The cries in me demand – like a police interrogation – that I *respond to them*. They call out to me and put me in question (Levinas 1969, 178–179, 244).

The other way into the obligation of “responsibility to” others (and to nonhuman animals, for example) takes place through the experience of fascination (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 239–254). In this case, with fascination, one finds oneself unable to stop looking at, say, a pack of animals. The fascination with the pack even leads this person to become fascinated with one of the animals in the pack. The fascination is always with an animal that

130 stands a bit apart from the pack, as its leader or stray member. This stray animal is not abnormal; it is the anomalous, that is, it is that which remains at the border of the pack, outside the pack's *nomos* or order. When the fascinated self finds this anomalous figure in the pack, the anomalous animal infects the self. It is as if the one who is fascinated comes to be demonically possessed by the anomalous animal. One is infected with this animal, and, in a word, one has become the animal. When I have become the animal, I cannot avoid feeling the need to *respond to the animal*. Therefore, something like Kantian autonomy is at work here, but autonomy now fused with heteronomy: the animal inside of me, *the animal that therefore I am*, commands me or gives me an imperative to which I must respond.

With the component of "responsibility *to*" in place, we can turn to the conceptual component of "responsibility *for*." As we just **transformed** Kantian autonomy, we must also transform the traditional idea of being responsible *for someone else*. The idea of being "responsible *for*" that must be pushed aside is the idea in which we think the word "for" means that we *represent* others. But if "responsibility *for*" means representation, then it is clear that we have homogenized others down to a generality. If we think of the word "animality," for example, we see one obvious fact. The word "animality" homogenizes all the millions of forms of animal life down to one kind. How is it possible that elephants and amoeba could be compared to one another? In order not to insult the multiplicity of animal life, and of others in general, "responsibility *for*" must be conceived without any generalizing representation. The role of the anomalous already helped us to see that the other in me is singular not general: a singularity "blocks" all general concepts (Deleuze 1994, 12–13; see **Singularization**). However, in order to see what "responsibility *for*" means positively, we need to make use of a French expression. Of course, the relationship expressed in "responsibility *for*" makes use of the English word "for"; in German it would be "*für*," and in French the word is "*pour*." However, in French one

can form the expression "*pour que*" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 109). A literal English translation of "*pour que*" would be "for that." But native English speakers say nothing like that. The standard English translation is "so that." Now if we can retain the idea of "*pour que*" and especially retain the "*pour*" or "for" within it, we can argue the following. Responsibility for others amounts *not* to representing them, which performs a kind of conceptual violence on them. "Responsibility for" really means responding to the others with which I am fascinated, this demon, or to the other within me, this specter – *pour que* (so that) the other might be able to become otherwise. Demonology or spectrality is always *responsibility for* the other's escape or flight from its misery. "Responsibility for" always means letting the other be free. And we could say that in genuine responsibility the freedom of the other must always come first.

Finally, we come to "responsibility *before*." In order to understand "responsibility *before*" others, one has to think phenomenologically again. But even more so, one has to reverse the phenomenological location of the gaze in the perceiver and place the gaze in the perceived – as if I, as the perceiver, experience myself under a gaze. Here, it is as if, in my fascination with others, I find myself before or in front of the ones with whom I am fascinated. They look back at me. And I experience this reversed gaze as a gaze of accusation. It is as if the others have laid down the law, and I am responsible before the law. "Responsibility *before*" means the experience of *standing before others* as if one is standing trial. Here we see the role of "responsibility," yet not "*for* others," but "*for* oneself." As we saw through the analysis of "responsibility *to*," the idea of a self-identical subject does not withstand any sort of deconstruction. However, here in being "responsible *before*," we must see that still, even as deconstructed, there is something like a self here, the very one put in question by others. It is this interrogated "I" that is on trial.

132 If I am standing trial before others, then at least I have been accused. More likely, I am guilty. Indeed, even if I have never made animals suffer, for example, I am complicit in the world-wide suffering inflicted on animal life in the name of food and fuel production. Certainly, I cannot escape the charge of a conceptual violence against others since I would be able neither to speak of them nor to speak to them without using general terms and concepts, without using representations, which violate the singularity of every single other. The experience of responsibility before others is therefore the experience of a conscience that is never at rest. Standing before the suffering of others, in front of their accusatory gaze, I suffer too – from guilt or, perhaps better, shame. Shame is the intensification of the empathy with which we started. Only under the condition of the feeling of shame is genuine responsibility possible. But we cannot stop here. This suffering that I undergo must be exaggerated. It must be exaggerated to the point that the experience of a disturbed conscience approximates either madness or the sublime. This exaggeration is infinite responsibility (Levinas 1969, 244). Thus, if we criticize contemporary philosophical and political ideas in the name of responsibility, we find that our demand for increased responsibility can never be complete.

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