The Essential Poverty of the Face: A Case for Levinasian Responsibility and Justice in Poverty Studies

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ABSTRACT

The moral deliberative theories that ethicists and justice advocates use to address poverty issues all stem from the analytic philosophical tradition, and, while no doubt helpful, they are not fully adequate. Emmanuel Levinas, a French phenomenologist from the continental philosophical tradition, offers what Derrida calls “an ethics of ethics” that is relevant to poverty studies. Levinas’s phenomenological description of responsibility is distinctive from and instructive to analytic accounts of moral responsibility and moral duties as responsibilities. In particular, Levinas is instructive to utilitarian and Kantian notions of responsibility insofar as each theory falls short when it comes to our moral sense of self and solipsistic individualism, respectively. In the end, since Levinas’s description of responsibility addresses some of the principle inadequacies of analytic accounts of moral responsibility, ethicists and justice advocates would do well to consider his work in poverty studies.

1: *INTRODUCTION*

In the United States alone, hundreds of thousands of deaths each year are attributable to low levels of education, racial inequality, social exclusion, and income-inequality.[1] All too often, those concerned with poverty alleviation fail to ever appreciate the unique individualities of these dispossessed, invisible people. All too often, we pretend as if we cannot hear the call of another person who demands justice. We need to understand that poverty is a fundamental societal problem, and we therefore need a robust interdisciplinary approach to poverty studies and human capability.

Fortunately, insofar as the study of poverty should involve the study of moral philosophy, there are a number of relevant deliberative theories in applied ethics and normative ethics from which students and educators can choose. In fact, reconceptualizations of utilitarianism and Kantianism in the latter half of the twentieth century inspired what some call poverty studies in the first place. Ethicists still frequently cite John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* in connection to poverty issues, Peter Singer's particular version of utilitarianism with respect to effective altruism, and Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach when it comes to human development.[2] It is notable, however, that almost all of the moral deliberative theories used in

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[1] Sandro Galea et al., "Estimated Deaths Attributable to Social Factors in the United States," in *The American Journal of Public Health* vol. 101, no. 8 (2011), 1456-1465.

[2] In this paper, I am particular concerned with contrasting utilitarianism and Kantianism with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics. Each of the moral deliberative theories cited above (Rawlsian contractarianism, Singer's utilitarianism, and Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach) incorporates elements of one or the other, or both. Quite obviously, Singer's form of consequentialism is utilitarian. Rawls's contractarianism is notably Kantian in its approach, insofar as it seeks principles everyone would agree to, rather than principles no-one could reasonably reject (compare this with Scanlon's contractualism). Nussbaum herself cites both Kantian and utilitarian influences on the capabilities approach: "The Capabilities Approach has close links to deontology. One of its most important historical antecedents is Kant. […] The *principle of each person as an end* […] is a version of Kant's idea of the duty to respect humanity as an end, and never to treat it as a mere means." Later in the same book, she writes: "In another way, however, the Capabilities Approach can be seen as a cousin of consequentialism. […] It announces that the right way to judge whether a given political situation is adequate, from the point of view of justice, is to look at *outcomes*." See Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: A Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 94-95. For views wherein ethicists cite Rawls in connection to poverty issues, see, for

Anglo-American philosophical discourse to address poverty issues stem from the analytic tradition. The continental tradition, on the other hand, has had much less to contribute to poverty studies in the United States and the United Kingdom.[3] At the very least, it is fair to say that the study of poverty does not typically incorporate ideas from the continental tradition—even those ideas with implicit connections to poverty issues.

This is problematic. Both sides of this entrenched philosophical divide have much to learn from each other. In particular, however, the absence of dialectical philosophical discourse between the two traditions on the critical issue of responsibility deprives ethical debates about poverty of much-needed conversation about individualism and selfhood as it concerns morality. This deficiency is especially undesirable since two of the most prominent moral theories from which ethicists often draw upon to address poverty-related injustices—utilitarianism and Kantianism—do not capture what it really means to be responsible in a moral sense. Whereas utilitarian ideas about how to maximize preferences or satisfactions strip the subject of the projects and attitudes that make her who she is, Kantian ideas about moral duties are inherently individualistic. Emmanuel Levinas, a French phenomenologist from the continental tradition known for his work related to Jewish philosophy and existentialism, helps rectify these inadequacies in both

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instance, Norman Daniels, Bruce Kennedy, and Ichiro Kawachi, "Justice, health, and health policy," in *Ethical Dimensions of Health Policy*, ed. by Marion Danis, Carolyn Clancy, and Larry Churchill (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Bertil Tungodden, "Poverty and Justice: A Rawlsian Framework," in the *Nordic Journal of Political Economy* vol. 23 (1996): 89-104. For an explicitly Kantian take on poverty issues, see Sarah Williams Holtman, "Kantian Justice and Poverty Relief," in *Kant-Studien* vol. 95, no. 1 (2004): 86-106.

[3] This is not to say that continental philosophers or those sympathetic to non-Anglophone philosophy have had nothing to say about justice concerns. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* have both exercised a massive influence on feminist philosophy. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* have had a similar impact on postcolonialism and critical race theory. Phenomenology itself has also been mobilized to make normative claims about oppression. See, for instance, Florentien Verhage, "Living with(out) borders: The intimacy of oppression," in *Emotion, Space and Society*, no. 13 (2014): 111-120 and Alia al-Saji, "Muslim Women and the Rhetoric of Freedom," in *Constructing the Nation: A Race and Nationalism Reader*, ed. by Mariana Ortega and Linda Martin Alcoff (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009).

utilitarianism and Kantianism, in addition to other popular models of responsibility in the analytic philosophical tradition.

While Levinas claims that an ethics with clearly delineated rules and prescriptions is not his theme, and while he fails to intervene in traditional ethical debates about utilitarianism or Kantian deontology, he nevertheless introduces an ethical account applicable to poverty issues.[4] His characterization of the face of the Other in terms of its essential destitution and nakedness and his notion of infinite, irrecusable, and asymmetrical responsibility to the Other have direct implications for poverty concerns. My focus in this study is Levinasian responsibility and how it compares and contrasts with both (1) moral responsibility as conceived by analytic philosophers and (2) responsibilities as duties as per utilitarianism and Kantianism. I also address some of the chief criticisms of Levinasian responsibility with reference to Levinas's work on justice. As I conclude, contrary to the critique of philosophers such as Richard Rorty, I claim that Levinas's ideas about responsibility are helpful in discussions about justice in the public sphere related to the duties of society to poor individuals. In the end, since Levinasian responsibility addresses some of the principle inadequacies of analytic accounts of moral responsibility, ethicists and justice advocates would do well to consider his work in poverty studies.

2: *THE FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER*

Who is Emmanuel Levinas? And why should ethicists who are worried about poverty care? His philosophical work is extraordinarily difficult to understand. His efforts to demonstrate the irreconcilable nature of the Same and the Other, his famous assertion that ethics is first philosophy, and his description of the ethical encounter with others strike many readers as esoteric and pointlessly abstract. Moreover, if ethics refers to perfect and imperfect duties, the maximization of

[4] Levinas does indeed engage with the philosophical work of Kant, but not in relation to deontological ethics.

pleasures or satisfactions, or the cultivation of virtues, then Levinasian ethics is simply not an ethics. Why, then, should we consider Levinas when it comes to poverty issues? If Levinas cannot provide us with concrete rules and prescriptions for how to act from the moral point of view and approximate justice on a societal level, his work seems, at best, practically irrelevant to poverty and justice concerns.

Levinas's philosophical project, however, is to provide a phenomenological description and a hermeneutics of lived experience in the world. In particular, he seeks to describe and interpret what it is like to encounter another human person without reference to concepts or ideas traditionally discussed in Western philosophy. His aim is to strike at the intrinsic relationality of intersubjective life.[5] He therefore extends the phenomenological analyses of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger to expose levels of experience with human others that neither of his proto-existentialist forebears similarly explain. In effect, Levinas describes in phenomenological terms what it means to be ethical in a primordial, or fundamental, sense. Jacques Derrida perhaps put it best when he said that "Levinas does not want to propose laws or moral rules […] it is a matter of [writing] an ethics of ethics," or what Derrida calls "the essence of the ethical relation in general."[6] This is why Levinas's phenomenological analyses are relevant to ethicists worried about poverty issues. In fact, with reference to the primordial nature of the ethical encounter, Levinas even claims that ethics is first philosophy.

Rather than locate the provenance of philosophy in the world or even in God, Levinas locates first philosophy in the prime condition for human communication—what he calls the face-to-face encounter with another person. The appearance of the face of the Other irrupts "into the

[5] Bettina Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Zalta (2011), online.
[6] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980, first published 1967), 79-153.

phenomenal order of appearances" and draws me out of a self-centered solipsism. This irruption, Levinas says, forces me to consider that my existence necessitates "the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved." My "being-in-the-world" is inherently possessive and therefore violent.[7] This leads Levinas to describe in phenomenological terms the encounter with the face of the Other, "the original site of the sensible." [8] In order to describe in detail the central features of the face-to-face encounter, however, I must first explain what Levinas means by the terms "Same" and "Other."

First introduced into philosophical discussion by Plato, the terms "Same" and "Other" occupy a central place in Western philosophy. While most philosophers understand the Other as provisionally separate from the Same, Levinas claims that they are completely irreconcilable. The Other who stands apart me as an "I" lies beyond my comprehension and is irreducible to the Same.[9] In other words, I cannot make the Other *me*; I cannot *possess* the Other. The Other is pure difference—what Levinas calls alterity—in an absolute sense. "The relation between the Other and me," Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, "issues neither in number nor in concept. The Other remains infinitely transcendent."[10] Levinas wants to examine in phenomenological terms the possibilities and conditions of the appearance of the Other in our lives.[11] His task is to describe what the encounter with the Other is like and how it shapes who we are as subjects with individualized characteristics. Most importantly, however, Levinas seeks to formulate the

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[7] In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas answers a question from Philippe Nemo with a disturbing question of his own. Nemo asks: "But if one fears for the Other and not for oneself, can one even live?" Levinas responds: "This is in fact the question one must ultimately pose. Should I be dedicated to being? By being, by persisting in being, do I not kill?" Here, he reaffirms the fundamental violence of being-in-a-world in which there are other vulnerable existents. See *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1995), 120.

[8] Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Sean Hand (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 83.

[9] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1991, first published 1961), 194.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 3.

encounter with the Other in ethical terms. "The relation before Same and Other," Levinasian scholar Colin Davis explains, "is described [sc. by Levinas] as fundamentally *ethical* in nature."[12]

The encounter with the Other is an encounter with her face. Levinas is keen to note that the face of the Other is "neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object."[13] In simpler terms, we can say that the face of the Other is not *simply* seen or touched, since to see or touch the face would be to make it an intentional object of consciousness which, in turn, would allow me to possess it and therefore reduce its otherness.[14] Nevertheless, Levinas has reason to describe the encounter with the Other in terms of the face-to-face. The face is the part of the body that is most often visible and expressive. The expression of the face therefore stands at the center of his phenomenological description of the face-to-face encounter.[15]

While the face may resist possession, it also speaks to me and invites me into an ethical relation. "The manifestation of the face is already discourse," Levinas says. In fact, the face issues a *command*: "You shall not commit murder."[16] The Levinasian scholar Michael Morgan explains that the command, "do not kill me," is a kind of plea, "something like 'make room for me' or 'feed me' or 'share the world with me' or 'reduce my suffering.'"[17] It is an obviously ethical plea. This commandment, however, is also an invitation. When the face commands me not to kill, it also summons me into a rational discourse in which I am called to answer for my responsibility to the Other. "In its expression," Levinas writes, "the face […] calls me into question, as if, by my possible future indifference, I had become the accomplice of the death to which the other […] is exposed."[18]

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[12] Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 47.
[13] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.
[14] Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 46.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.
[17] Michael Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 68.
[18] Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 83.

Put another way, I am summoned to respond to the face of the Other who demands an answer to her cry for justice.[19] I must listen and respond to her appeal. If I remain indifferent, then I am an associate in her death. For Levinas, this is true violence— "ignoring this opposition, ignoring the face of a being, avoiding the gaze," and thereby denying its plea to live.[20]

2.1: *THE POWER OF THE COMMAND*

At this point it is perfectly reasonable to ask how the face of the Other can possibly command me to perform any act at all. Why must I respond to her summons? What *compels* me to enter into this rational discourse in which I am duty-bound to provide an account? It is important to note that there is no force in the physical sense that can compel me to be ethical, just as the face is not protected from violence and actual murder—a fact that we know all too well. People kill other people all the time. Still, Levinas claims that the face of the Other does indeed force itself upon my existence: "To manifest oneself as a face," he writes, "is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form."[21] Levinas construes the imposition of the face as a moral necessity; the face-to-face encounter "can be only […] a moral summons."[22] The face draws this moral force from what Levinas calls "its destitution and nudity." "The face of the Other is destitute," he describes. "It is *the poor* for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all."[23] Similarly, Levinas writes that the Other "has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan"; here, Levinas appropriates biblical terms used in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the oppressed.[24] In a word, the face has an "essential poverty."[25] For Levinas, it is this vulnerability of the Other that paradoxically commands me and demands my response. This is not a claim derived

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[19] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215.
[20] Emmanuel Levinas, "Freedom and Command," in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 19.
[21] Ibid., 200. My emphasis.
[22] Ibid., 196.
[23] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89. My emphasis.
[24] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 251.
[25] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.

from rational deduction or even rationality itself. Levinas trusts that, indeed, the utterly vulnerable face of the Other compels us into an ethical relation.

Of course, the mere fact that we enter into this ethical relation by no means necessitates that we therefore act ethically. Levinas is descriptive and not prescriptive in his discussion of the face-to-face encounter. Nevertheless, the *power*, if you will, of the command issued by the face of the Other derives from what makes it powerless in the first place—its essential poverty. It commands from a paradoxical position of majesty and misery.[26] Levinas perhaps best describes the power of the destitute face when he writes that "infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyzes my powers, and from the depths of defenseless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution."[27] Should we therefore choose to turn our backs on the face's essential poverty, we do so in full view that our actions fly in the face of ethics. Diane Perpich captures the seriousness of such an ethical failure succinctly: "I may turn away [from the other's cry…] but not in complete indifference or with the certainty that it is none of my affair."[28] When we refuse to respond to the Other's command that we not commit murder, we do in fact kill. Given that we *do* often deafen our ears to the cry of the Other, we do not, it seems, live without murder.[29]

2.2: *THE DESCRIPTION OF THE FACE AND POVERTY ISSUES*

Levinas's description of the face as "destitute" and "hungry" and "naked" or "nude" helps ethicists connect his work to poverty issues. The description of the face of the Other in such provocative terms is no mere accident; as I mention earlier, Levinas appropriates biblical terms in the Hebrew Scriptures often used by its authors to describe the oppressed. His relationship with scriptural texts influences his phenomenological analysis of the face. Levinas describes the Bible as

[26] Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 50.
[27] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199-200.
[28] Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 90.
[29] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 120.

"the Book of books wherein the first things are said, those that *become* said so that human life has a meaning."[30] Later, he states that "phenomenology is the recall of these forgotten thoughts, of these intentions."[31] In his phenomenological description, then, Levinas seeks to remind us, using poignant biblical language, of the essential, primordial poverty of other persons, whose vulnerable nature we have "forgotten." "The Other […] is the weak, the poor, the 'widow and the orphan,'" he states simply, "whereas I am the rich or the powerful."[32] Nevertheless, whatever wealth another person possesses, however well-off she may in fact be, I still encounter the Other as vulnerable, and this applies to all others. Morgan writes:

> This picturesque, rhetorical language is of course metonymy [i.e., "that which takes its expression from near and close things and by which we can comprehend a thing that is not referred to by its proper word"]; the primordial relation to the other via the epiphany of the other's face applies not just to these types of people; in fact, it applies to each and every person, insofar as that person addresses the I out of her weakness, her need, and her intrinsic poverty.[33]

Even if, however, the epiphany of the face of the Other applies to all people, and not just to poor persons, it is a serious mistake to conclude from this that all people are destitute to a similar extent. While every person whose face I encounter may be poor in the phenomenal sense to which Levinas calls our attention, some are certainly *poorer* than others. Those who experience

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[30] Ibid., 23.
[31] Ibid., 30.
[32] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987, first published 1947), 83. For biblical references to the widow and to the orphan jointly in the Hebrew Scriptures, see: Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:18, 24:17, 24:19, 24:20, 24:21, 26:12, 27:19; Isaiah 1:17, 9:16, 10:2; Jeremiah 7:6, 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5; Psalms 68:6, 109:9, 146:9; Lamentations 5:3. Of course this list excludes similar descriptions of the Other in the New Testament. It is no wonder, then, why Levinas describes the Other in such terms. This is a predominant scriptural theme.

On a separate point, I should note that *my* power as subject derives from the alterity of the Other. "The expression the face introduces into the world," Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, "does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power." As I mention on p. 9, the Other does indeed possess a kind of power as well. She is not completely vulnerable. See *Totality and Infinity*, 198.
[33] Michael Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Philosophy*, 71. My definition of metonymy is from the Latin text *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the oldest surviving Latin treatise on rhetoric: *Denominatio* [i.e., metonymy] *est, quae ab rebus propinquis et finitimis trahit orationem, qua possit intellegi res, quae non suo vocabulo sit appellata. Ad Her*. 4.32.43.

material deprivation, social exclusion, or capabilities deficiency are no doubt especially vulnerable. It is this focus on destitution and poverty in his description of the face-to-face encounter that makes Levinas so important to poverty studies. If I am inclined to think about *all* others as intrinsically poor, then I will certainly realize just how oppressed the especially poor—that is, those to whom we typically refer as poor in ordinary discourse—really are. Levinas effectively shifts our frame of reference for discussions about poverty issues, since, with Levinas in mind, it becomes quite difficult to overlook poverty-related injustices. Poverty becomes an essential touchstone in conversations—private, pubic, policy-related, or otherwise—about *people.*

2.3: *THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR: A COMPARISON*

This Levinasian notion of the essential poverty of the face may seem pointlessly abstract. Nevertheless, it closely resembles a similar idea quite prevalent in public discourse about poverty—namely, the Catholic social doctrine of the preferential option for the poor. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,* Pope John Paul II describes this preferential option as "a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness." The preferential option for the poor "applies […] to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods." Perhaps most notably in his discussion of the preferential option, John Paul uses the same biblical terms with which Levinas describes the face: "This love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope of a better future."[34] In effect, John Paul explains how we adopt God's special concern for the poor in our private and public lives; it should imbue each and every decision we make. "Our daily life as well as our decisions in the political and economic fields must be marked by these realities," John Paul

[34] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42: *AAS* 80 (1988), 572- 573.

asserts.[35]

The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez explains how the preferential option for the poor does not mean that God or Christians *only* love the poor, or that they somehow love the poor *more* than other people. The term preference, he claims, "implies the universality of God's love, which excludes no one. It is only within the framework of this universality that we can understand the preference, that is, 'what comes first.'"[36] Gutierrez's comments exemplify exactly how we should conceptualize the Levinasian characterization of the face as essentially destitute. It is *only* within the framework of universality with respect to essential poverty and destitution that we can understand that those who are *especially* vulnerable should come first. Without Levinas, it seems plausible we can become so absorbed in conversations about the equality of persons that we fail to appreciate how others who are *not* us suffer from unfamiliar kinds of oppression so as to deserve our special attention. We are "rich and powerful," and we are called by the Other to attend to the needs of the "the weak, the poor, the 'widow and the orphan.'"[37]

2.4: *INTERLUDE: LEVINASIAN HYPERBOLE AND RHETORIC*

The need to cite a more familiar idea such as the preferential option for the poor in order to help make sense of Levinas's somewhat obtuse, rather incoherent philosophical prose points to the interpretive difficulty faced by commentators and readers of his work. Could he have not just made his point clearer? Davis notes that "from the perspective of analytic philosophy, it would be easy to dismiss Levinas's text as exhibiting a typically Continental combination of lack of intellectual rigor and hopeless confusion."[38] Before I turn to Levinas's description of responsibility and the related conception of substitution, which will no doubt strike readers unfamiliar with

[35] Ibid.
[36] Gustavo Gutierrez, *Essential Writings*, ed. by James B. Nickoloff (New York, NY: Orbis, 1996), 145.
[37] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 83.
[38] Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 37.

Levinas as arcane and even unethically absurd, a brief explanation for why Levinas is so difficult to understand is therefore necessary. One must first take seriously the task Levinas has set forth for himself. Davis calls this task "an intensely paradoxical intellectual project." On the one hand, Levinas seeks to break out of the Western philosophical tradition that he has inherited. To do this, he complicates his propositional and assertive syntax with terms such as "transcendence," "alterity," "infinity," "the Other," and of course, "ethics." On the other hand, the use of such terms in a written text necessarily makes them objects of philosophical inquiry and, in turn, ostensibly restores them to the tradition out of which they are supposed to break.[39] This poses semantic and syntactical problems for Levinas, which cause him to make some very odd assertions. For example, he writes that the encounter with the Other is an "experience which is not an experience," "a relationship which is not a relationship," and an encounter that "is not an event which can be located in the time or the history of the subject."[40] In response to the paradoxical nature of his ethical project, then, Levinas adopts an intense rhetorical approach meant to "shock" the reader out of her familiarity with of two centuries' worth of philosophical discourse.

Levinas's rhetorical approach is therefore typified by excessive hyperbole. While such hyperbole no doubt shocks and re-orients readers, it sometimes seems *so* excessive that the reader must sincerely wonder whether what Levinas presents as possible ethical conduct is simply impossible or even *un*ethical. In Levinas's defense, Stephen Webb says that those who take Levinas strictly at his word "miss […] that his rhetoric as well as his method is hyperbolic precisely because he cannot philosophize as usual about the fundamental situation of being obligated" to the Other.[41] Webb characterizes Levinas's rhetoric in his description of responsibility to the Other (which I

[39] Ibid., 35.
[40] Ibid., 35.
[41] Stephen Webb, "The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess: A Christian Theological Response to Emmanuel Levinas," in *Modern Theology* vol. 15, no. 1 (1999), 4.

discuss in Section Three) as a "continuous mode of exaggeration, acceleration, and intensification. Indeed, hyperbole, due to its alleged irrationality, is the perfect trope for a project that tries to say what cannot be said."[42] Levinas's excessive hyperbole represents an attempt to dislocate his reader, who is most likely (though by no means necessarily) an educated and well-to-do person acquainted with Western philosophy. To be sure, one does not feel "at home" in Levinas's prose, and one's textual encounter with Levinas may well be traumatic. It is just this kind of reaction, however, that Levinas hopes will communicate the profound way in which his project stands apart from other philosophical undertakings.

While it makes sense to describe Levinas's rhetoric and method in this manner, it also seems plausible to conclude from Webb's defense of Levinas that, if Levinas simply relies on hyperbole to differentiate his philosophical enterprise, one need not take seriously his ethical pronouncements. After all, they seem to demand quite a lot from the reader. This would be a mistake. Without a doubt, it can be difficult to draw the line between merely hyperbolic rhetoric and substantive ethical demands in Levinas's text. When it comes to Levinasian responsibility and his related conception of substitution, there is a constant interpretive battle to determine whether he "really means it." While there is no easy way around the complexities of this hermeneutical problem, one should always keep in mind why Levinas seeks to shock and re-orient his reader in the first place. His attempt to break from the ontologies and phenomenologies of his forebears is sincere—this is no *mere* performance, even if his work contains performative elements. In the end, if the reader decides to not take Levinas seriously, or to dismiss his ideas as vacuously hyperbolic, she has already conceded (implicitly or explicitly) that they make her uncomfortable and, in a certain sense, Levinas has accomplished his aim. Levinas *should* make us want to repudiate his conclusions. Yet if we choose to frivolously dismiss Levinas entirely, then we are not so unlike the individualistic

[42] Ibid.

"I" who spurns the summons of the Other. We may turn away from Levinas's own summons, as it were, but not with the certainty that his revolutionary philosophical project has no bearing on our ethical lives whatsoever.

3: *RESPONSIBILITY*

Levinas's phenomenological analysis of the ethical encounter with the Other, what he calls the face-to-face, is the foundation for his description of responsibility, which stands at the center of my claim about his contribution to the field of poverty studies. The Other's cry for justice, what I have also formulated as her plea or her command, installs a responsibility for the Other in the self, whose selfhood, in fact, is constituted in responsibility. The self is the Same or the "I." The Other is another person. The plea of the other person born out of her essential poverty and destitution summons a response to her plea and, from the self's perspective, an unlimited responsibility toward the other person in virtue of that plea or command.[43] Responsibility therefore manifests in the face-to-face encounter.

Given that Levinas is a phenomenologist, he describes in phenomenal terms what it "is like" or who we really are when we are ethical. There is an implicit normative assumption that underpins his entire philosophical project. Likewise, his phenomenological analysis of responsibility describes responsibility as it really is (i.e., when we respond, in responsibility, to the needs of others, as we should do), in what amounts to a description based on near-empirical observations. He subjects intersubjective experience to rigorous phenomenological analysis in an effort to strip it of all conceptual accretions and to expose previously undisclosed levels of what it "is like" to be with or encounter other people. What other moral theorists are inclined to call responsibility is, from a Levinasian perspective, either patently inaccurate or simply not the whole story. His description of responsibility is therefore instructive to other accounts of responsibility because, while it depends

[43] Michael Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Levinas*, 66.

on phenomenological analysis (quite unlike each of the other analytic accounts to which I refer in this third section), it is an account that we should nevertheless live up to.

Before I examine the most salient characteristics of Levinasian responsibility in this section, I first review common-sense and standard analytic accounts of responsibility in order to demonstrate just how different Levinasian responsibility is from everyday and Anglo-American philosophical conceptions. I then proceed to interpret Levinasian responsibility in detail and focus on three central elements: infinity, irrecusability, and asymmetry, insofar as each of these elements deviates from notable features of common-sense and analytic accounts of responsibility. To conclude this section, I discuss how Levinasian responsibility, radical as it may seem, is both *relevant* to poverty issues and *adds* to how we approach such issues in ways that the common-sense and standard accounts do not.

3.1: *COMMON-SENSE: THE LIABILITY MODEL OF RESPONSIBILITY*

In our everyday conversation, we often invoke responsibility in our efforts to praise and blame or reward and sanction. While the notion of responsibility may seem intuitive, however, we hardly ever take the time to reflect upon what responsibility actually means. Nevertheless, despite our disinclination to robustly characterize responsibility, common-sense notions share a number of conceptual elements. In particular, the well-known liability model of responsibility outlined by Iris Marion Young incorporates three common-sense features, all of which are tied to the common-sense intuition to associate accountability with responsibility—i.e., that a person is liable to provide an account, or a *response*, for some state of affairs.[44] Likewise, on the liability model view, responsibility depends on (1) causality (that some act is attributable to me in a demonstrably causal way); (2) that I act voluntarily and without coercion; and (3) that I act with sufficient awareness of the consequences that my act may reasonably provoke. If these conditions are

[44] Matthew Talbert, *Moral Responsibility* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 6.

fulfilled, then I am accountable for my act and blameworthy for its harmful ramifications. The liability model of responsibility resembles the way American courts understand responsibility in the justice system.[45] As such, it is necessarily retrospective and tied to blameworthiness and punishment. Perhaps most importantly, the common-sense liability model holds that responsibility is *limited*. If an act is not causally attributable to me, if I am hypnotized and therefore act involuntarily, or if I have no idea what consequences my act may reasonably provoke, then I am not responsible and cannot be appropriately blamed, no matter how much harm my act may have caused. In his description of responsibility, which I will address shortly, Levinas dispenses with such limitations.

3.2: *COMMON-SENSE: ROLE AND CAUSAL RESPONSIBILITY*

The common-sense liability model of responsibility implies that it is limited with respect *to whom* I am responsible as well. This limitation is evident in two ways. First, certain roles and relationships demand responsibility tied to specific actions. A parent is expected to care for his child, for instance, and if he fails to do so, we are inclined to blame him.[46] The responsibility connected to parental care, however, does not extend to the parent's relationship with persons other than his children. In a similar case, the captain of a ship has an important role-related duty to persons aboard his ship. He is "responsible for" their safety insofar as "responsibility" picks out a specific duty that captains have.[47] It is, of course, common to hear people described as a "responsible parent" or a "responsible captain." In such instances, Matthew Talbert notes, "the word 'responsible' commends a person's behavior relative to the standards that apply to the role that the person occupies." Insofar as role-dependent duties are often called "responsibilities," these examples reference the common-sense association of responsibility with certain roles and

[45] Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97-98.
[46] Ibid., 98.
[47] Talbert, *Moral Responsibility*, 7.

relationships—i.e., role responsibility.

The second limitation with respect *to whom* I am responsible is tied to the notion of causality. While the liability model outlined earlier reflects this common-sense intuition, there is more to be said about the difficulties with causality when it comes to responsibility. To be sure, there is an intuitive sense that if I am not causally tied to the harm suffered by a particular individual, then she cannot hold me accountable, and therefore responsible, for that harm. It would make no sense, for instance, if my friend blamed me for her poor performance on her philosophy exam when she simply failed to study, and I made no attempt to hinder her performance. Nevertheless, causality can be difficult to discern in an obvious manner. Take, for example (to return to our ship captain), the case of a ship captain who has lost his ship in the midst of an unprecedented tropical storm. When his ship sank, however, the captain was drunk and unable to attend to his duties. Let us also suppose that the ship would not have sunk had it not encountered the tropical storm—in other words, the drunkenness was not sufficient in and of itself to have caused the wreck.[48] Who, or what, is to blame for the loss of the ship: the storm, the captain, or some combination of both? Causality alone seems unhelpful in our efforts to ascribe responsibility in this situation and many others like it. Yet, despite the difficulties associated with determinations of causality, "in normal cases, we typically hold people morally responsible for actions and outcomes only if they played a direct or indirect causal role in bringing these things about."[49] Common-sense intuition, then, implies that while causality may not be sufficient when it comes to responsibility, some kind of causal connection is necessary. To foreshadow my later discussion, Levinas rejects both role-related and causal limitations to responsibility. In fact, for Levinas, causal connection is *not* necessary in order to a person to be responsible.

[48] Talbert introduces this helpful example in *Moral Responsibility*, 9.
[49] Ibid.

3.3: *COMMON-SENSE: RECIPROCAL AND SYMMETRICAL*

Finally, common-sense typically holds that responsibility between two morally developed, adult persons is reciprocal, or symmetrical. The ethical demand one can make upon me is commensurate to the demand that I can make upon her; no one is *more* responsible to the other, for this would upset our notion of fairness. As Christine Korsgaard puts it:

> To hold someone responsible is to regard her as a *person*—that is to say, as a free and equal person, capable of acting both rationally and morally. It is therefore to regard her as someone with whom you can enter the kind of relation that is possible only among free and equal rational people: a relation of reciprocity. When you hold someone responsible […] you are prepared to accept promises, offer confidences […] cooperate on a project, enter a social contract, [etc.]. You are willing to deal with her on the basis of the expectation that each of you will act from a certain view of the other.[50]

Suppose I drafted a contract with another person to build a house, the terms of which stipulated that we would share the workload. It would be odd indeed if, when my partner shirked her duties and abandoned the project entirely, I did not hold her responsible. Just as I was duty-bound to hold up my end of the contract, she was duty-bound to hold up her end. Insofar as I considered my partner a person, I expected her to *reciprocate* the commitment that she and I made. Our mutual commitment to reciprocity, then, provided the pretext with reference to which I could hold her responsible for her actions. In this sense, reciprocity is an intuitive, common-sense feature of responsibility. Once more, to anticipate my subsequent discussion of Levinas's description of responsibility, non-reciprocity and asymmetry, rather than reciprocity and symmetry, stands at the center of his phenomenological account.

Thus, despite their ubiquitousness in everyday moral life, Levinasian responsibility radically modifies each of the characteristic features of the liability model of responsibility and the intuitions associated with common-sense responsibility. Before I turn to Levinas's own account, I

[50] Christine Korsgaard, "Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations," in *Philosophical Perspectives* vol. 6 (1992), 306.

introduce four more robust philosophical treatments of responsibility that, while widely-accepted in the analytic tradition, Levinasian responsibility also upends.

3.4: *STANDARD ANALYTIC ACCOUNTS*

Standard analytic accounts of responsibility bolster and problematize the imprecise notion of responsibility prevalent in our everyday moral lives. As Susan Wolf points out, the concept of responsibility is somewhat mysterious. On examination, it tends to become more difficult to adequately conceptualize and threatens "variously to be incoherent or impossible or universally inapplicable."[51] Different philosophers posit various conditions necessary for responsibility and, in relation to a similar concern, conditions for praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. They all, however, talk about responsibility with *moral* rather than just causal force.[52] If, on a bus, I step on someone's toe because the person next to me shoved me, this act is causally attributable to me while, at the same time, I am not *morally* responsible for such an act, and therefore not an appropriate candidate for blame. Beyond this distinction, views on what moral responsibility refers to and what kinds of creatures are candidates for responsibility widely differ. It will be helpful to briefly summarize the salient features of some of the most important kinds of responsibility to which philosophers typically refer.

There are four interrelated ways to talk about moral responsibility that derive from two simple questions.

1: What is it to be responsible?
2: What is a person responsible for?[53]

3.4.1: *MORAL AGENCY AND THE REAL-SELF*

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[51] Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.
[52] Though, it should be noted, causality is an essential component to the liability model of responsibility of which I outlined earlier. See pp. 17-18.
[53] See Garrath Williams, "Responsibility," in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online, for more on the four ways to talk about moral responsibility and the questions about responsibility set forth here.

The first question usually refers to concerns about moral agency. To be responsible is to be the sort of creature that can properly be held responsible for its actions. While almost all philosophers say that a normal human adult is just this kind of creature, they also try to expound upon this answer, typically with reference to metaphysical features of normal adults, such as their free will. For instance, Harry Frankfurt draws a distinction between first-order desires (for example, to want to read) and second-order desires (to want to want to read). Frankfurt identifies second-order desires that one wants to be effective, or that one wants to be her will, as second-order volitions. One must have second-order volitions on Frankfurt's account in order to be a person, and therefore a candidate for responsibility.[54] Others claim that responsibility depends on whether a person's action is attributable to her real self—that is, her ability to dictate her behavior on the basis of her will and her valuational system. Victims of hypnosis, coercion, and determinative diseases such as kleptomania are not responsible on this model of responsibility since their actions are not reflective of their real selves.[55] Still, others worry that we may have reason to question the possibility of someone's responsibility *for* her real self. With an eye toward the problematic notion of *causa sui*, incompatibilists such as Galen Strawson contend that they *very concept* of responsibility is incoherent, for it has within it the seeds of a demand that is metaphysically impossible for a person to fulfill.[56] Those views that *do* endorse the concept of moral responsibility, however, all share a similar feature: responsibility has certain conditions with respect to agency that, if unsatisfied, excuse or exempt an individual from responsibility. Levinas, on the other hand, dismisses wholesale Strawson's rejection of the concept of responsibility and, since the fact of responsibility precedes questions of the self, is simply unconcerned with questions

[54] Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" in *Free Will*, ed. by Gary Watson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 325.
[55] Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, 30-33.
[56] Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," in *Philosophical Studies* vol. 75, no. 1 (1994): 5-24.

as to whether to tie responsibility to the real self, second-order volitions, or some other human attribute or metaphysical idea. I will return to this point later.

3.4.2: *RESPONSIBILITY AS A VIRTUE*

When we ask what it is to be responsible, we may also consider responsibility as a morally valuable character trait. I am therefore responsible insofar as I behave in ways related to such a trait. Recall, for instance, the cases of the "responsible parent" and the "responsible captain." This idea about responsibility as a virtue, then, is clearly ubiquitous in ordinary conversation. We often talk about the social responsibility of a corporation, we praise those who act responsibly, and we criticize others who act irresponsibly. In each of these examples, just as in the cases of the parent and captain, we conceptualize responsibility as a virtue that people may or may not exhibit, and that they can, perhaps, cultivate over time. Truth be told, the philosophical literature on responsibility as a virtue is quite limited, and while Levinas may accede to the notion that responsibility is a character trait of some kind, it is not one that some people have and others do not have. For Levinas, the Self is always-already responsible.

3.4.3: *RETROSPECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY*

When we ask the second question, what a person is responsible for, philosophers most often connect this to the common-sense notions of accountability and causation described earlier. If certain conditions are met, we are responsible *for* what we have done in a causal sense and therefore accountable for those past actions. The liability model of responsibility functions as a retrospective account; it looks backward to see whether certain conditions were fulfilled in order to determine whether someone is responsible. Harry Frankfurt's famous "principle of alternate possibilities" also resembles a retrospective account of responsibility. He modifies the traditional principle to state that "a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only

because he could not have done otherwise."[57] This emphasis on "could have done otherwise" is prevalent in the philosophical literature on responsibility. Like other retrospective accounts, it looks backward to see whether a certain condition—the ability *not* to have done what I did in fact do—was met. Levinas does not incorporate conditional limitations in his description of responsibility. For Levinas, responsibility constitutes selfhood, and it makes little sense to say (from a Levinasian perspective) that selfhood is dependent on certain retrospective conditions tied to responsibility. Responsibility is fundamental to intersubjective existence. I will also return to this below.

3.4.4: *PROSPECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY AND RESPONSIBILITIES AS DUTIES*

In an entirely different sense, when we ask what a person is responsible for, we also sometimes mean that I am responsible *for* the fulfillment of certain duties or moral obligations. Responsibility tied to what is morally obligated of us looks *forward* to what we *should* to do and is therefore *prospective* in nature. Act utilitarians assert that I am morally obligated to promote the most preferences or satisfactions of the most people. Kantians claim that I have perfect duties about which I have no choice to fulfill and imperfect duties to myself and others about which I have some choice how to fulfill. I am morally obligated to meet both. At the same time, however, insofar as one can fail to satisfy one's moral duties, or responsibilities, utilitarian and Kantian accounts of responsibility are retrospective as well. In fact, it is quite common to speak of duties as "responsibilities" and to speak of responsibility in this retrospective sense.[58] On both utilitarian and Kantian theories, if I fail to do what is morally required, I am morally responsible for this failure and can be held to account. Even those who endorse these theories, however, also debate about

[57] Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," in *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. 66, no. 23 (1969): 838.
[58] Talbert, *Moral Responsibility*, 8. "I have failed to live up to my responsibilities" is a phrase we often use when we recognize that we did not do what we were morally obligated to do.

the *content* and *authority* of morality—that is, *what* morality requires of us and *how* we should prioritize moral concerns in our lives. Whereas some philosophers claim that morality leaves room for personal interests of supposedly non-moral import, others maintain that we need not consider the moral point of view first and foremost—in other words, moral values do not necessarily sit atop the value hierarchy.[59] I will specifically address how Levinasian responsibility is instructive to Kantian and utilitarian accounts in Section Four of this study. For now, it is safe to say that responsibility is a particularly thorny issue, one that Levinas complicates even further with his radical account of infinite, irrecusable, and asymmetrical responsibility.[60]

3.5: *A LEVINASIAN DESCRIPTION OF RESPONSIBILITY*
3.5.1: *INFINITE: NOT RETROSPECTIVELY OR PROSPECTIVELY LIMITED*

The responsibility conceived by Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being* inverts the common-sense liability model of responsibility and most accounts within the analytic tradition, insofar as it is (1) infinite, (2) irrecusable, and (3) asymmetrical. First, Levinas unmoors responsibility from the common-sense condition of causality or attributability found in retrospective accounts such as the liability model. I find myself responsible, he claims, not because of any "offenses that I […] committed, but because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all *in* the others, even for their responsibility."[61] By this measure, I am responsible for that which I have not done, for that which does not concern me in any immediate way, and even for that which does not ostensibly matter to me at all.[62] Simply put, in order to be responsible, some act *does not* need to be attributable to me in a demonstrably causal way. Responsibility for Levinas

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[59] See Thomas Nagel, "Living Right and Living Well," in *The View From Nowhere* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987): 189-207 for the former view, and Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," in *The Variety of Values* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015): 11-29 for the latter view.
[60] For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on the account of responsibility, tied to the idea of substitution, that Levinas puts forth in *Otherwise Than Being*.
[61] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 99. My emphasis for clarification.
[62] Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 84; Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 95.

is therefore *infinite* and *unlimited*, not only with respect to the immateriality of causal conditions or whether there were alternative possibilities to have done otherwise, but also with respect *to whom* I am responsible. For I am responsible, in the words of Dostoevsky, "for all men before all, and I more than all the others."[63] Responsibility is infinite in yet another sense insofar as I can never possibly meet its demand. In fact, the more I attempt to fulfill my responsibility, "the more I am responsible" and "the further away I am" from its full realization.[64] There is always "one step more" that I can take toward the Other to whom I am responsible. There is always one more way in which I can respond to her summons.[65]

In addition, Levinas claims that responsibility is not dependent on what is possible or actualizable with respect to what I *should* do in the future (in a prospective moral responsibility-sense).[66] "The infinite passion of responsibility," he writes, proceeds "beyond […] the possible," for responsibility precedes all calculations about the "possibles in oneself."[67] Unlike utilitarian and Kantian moral deliberative theories (which I closely examine in relation to Levinas in Section Five), Levinas explicitly denies the requirement that the scope of responsibility not exceed the power of an individual to actually meet the demand—in effect, that *ought* not exceed *can*.[68] My own possibilities simply have no relevance to responsibility, since Levinasian responsibility is initially a *for-the-Other*, not a for-itself. Responsibility is not for the "I," the Self or Same, or the subject.

In the face-to-face encounter with the Other, the responsibility of the Other is also incumbent on me as constitutive of my responsibility to her. I am responsible for her very

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[63] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Constance Garnett (New York, NY: New American Library, 1957), 264; Levinas often quotes Dostoyevsky in relation to responsibility. For instance, see Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love" in *Entre Nous*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 105, and Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98, 101.
[64] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997, first published 1981), 93.
[65] Ibid., 84.
[66] See pp. 24-25.
[67] Ibid., 113.
[68] Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 84.

responsibility, even to the point wherein the persecuted "is liable to answer for the persecutor."[69] Here, Levinasian responsibility flies in the face of the analytic conclusion about attributability and past actions once more. How can I possibly be responsible for what *someone else* has done, let alone he who persecutes me unjustly? Levinas nevertheless stands by what seems like an impossible, even offensive claim. Indeed, "to be infinitely responsible," Diane Perpich explains in frank terms, "is to be ever on call, always at one's post […] never quits with it, never with an option to take a day or an hour or even a minute for one's own cares."[70] It important to recall at this point that Levinas's account of responsibility is a phenomenological description of responsibility when we respond to the summons of the Other in the face-to-face encounter. While this is no doubt an exacting standard for ethical life, one must also remember that the face-to-face encounter is exclusively between the Self and the Other. There is no third-party.[71]

3.5.2: *IRRECUSABLE: PRECEDES THE REAL-SELF*

When analytic philosophers beholden to the real-self tradition say that someone is responsible, they mean that the individual in question voluntarily acted in accordance with her real-self. Yet this notion of the real-self rests upon the assumption that responsibility comes *after* one has any self at all, and certainly not before one chooses to identify with any particular set of values that real-self theorists claim constitute one's valuational system.[72] Levinasian responsibility dispenses with this notion. Responsibility is irrecusable and cannot be denied, since it is prior to every free commitment, "prior to every memory," and "ulterior to every accomplishment."[73] Responsibility stems from "a time *before* my freedom" and "before any present," yet not in any empirical past in which I could have contracted any commitments. Rather, Levinas speaks of an

[69] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 96; Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 111.
[70] Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 84.
[71] I address the entrance of the third party in Section Five.
[72] See pp. 22-23.
[73] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 10.

immemorial and unrepresentable past that was never present, "more ancient than consciousness," from which responsibility derives.[74] Levinas's struggle with semantic and syntactical limitations is evident in these near-impenetrable assertions. His attempt to describe the primordial, or fundamental character of responsibility without reference to more familiar concepts or ideas leaves the reader somewhat baffled. This is because responsibility is at its core an absolute passion "whose active source does not, in any way, occur in consciousness." It is "non-thematizable," an experience (that it is not a phenomenon in the strict sense, but rather an epiphany) of command and response that transcends conceptualization. Responsibility's irrecusability is therefore impossible to prove while nevertheless impossible to deny.[75] With non-falsifiable propositions, Levinas claims, in effect, that we are always-already responsible to all, whether we like (or choose) it or not.

3.5.3: *ASYMMETRICAL: NEITHER RECIPROCAL NOR SYMMETRICAL*

Finally, Levinas asserts that responsibility is not, contrary to the moral intuition described earlier, reciprocal or symmetrical.[76] This is perhaps the most distinctive and difficult aspect of Levinas's account of responsibility, if not his entire ethical project. In fact, the postmodernist philosopher Zygmunt Bauman describes the dissolution of responsibility from reciprocity as the decisive element that marks out Levinas's ethical theory from virtually all others.[77] In accordance with the biblical description of the Other as a stranger, orphan, or widow, Levinas maintains that the Other does not share my powers or responsibilities. I cannot make the same demand upon the Other that she demands of me, since my responsibility is not mirrored by the Other's reciprocal responsibility toward me, at least not from my perspective as Self.[78] "Reciprocity is [*her*] affair," Levinas explains to the skeptical interlocutor, about which the "I" should not be concerned. The

[74] Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 84.
[75] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 102.
[76] See p. 20.
[77] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 220.
[78] Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 51.

Other does not owe me the same response that her summons compels me to provide. For my part, I am subjected to the Other, even to the point of self-sacrifice and death.[79] In fact, Levinas characterizes responsibility for the Other specifically as responsibility *for the death* of the Other. "The invisible death faced by the face of the other," he states, "summons me, demands me, claims me" as if her death were "my business."[80] I cannot abandon the Other to her aloneness, her destitution, her death-bound solitude, and her poverty. I fear for her death, and insofar as I fear, I am prepared to die for her.[81] Responsibility, for Levinas, is so one-sided as to require that I make the ultimate sacrifice. It necessitates a radically kenotic response *for* another in which the ethical subject empties oneself entirely and offers her bloodied heart in vulnerable subjection before (*coram*) the other person.[82] To use Levinas's provocative rhetoric, responsibility requires "making a gift of my own skin."[83] Of course, the asymmetrical nature of responsibility is exactly why Levinas cannot offer a moral theory with universalizable rules and prescriptions. Whereas "I am ready to die for the Other" is an appropriate moral statement, "he should be ready to die for me" is obviously not. The command to sacrifice applies to me and me alone; sacrifice is not a matter of the reciprocation of services.[84] Levinas never wants to make that claim. *I* am my brother's keeper, as Bauman explains with reference to the biblical story of Cain, "whether or not my brother sees his own brotherly duties the same way I do."[85]

3.6: *SUBSTITUTION AND SUBJECTIVITY*

Insofar as the Other's death is "my business" and her summons demands my individual response, my responsibility is untransferable—no one can replace me. The uniqueness,

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[79] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98-99.
[80] Levinas, "From the One to the Other," in *Entre Nous*, 145.
[81] Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," in *Entre Nous*, 173. See also, "Dying For" in *Entre Nous.*
[82] Levinas*, Otherwise Than Being*, 92. I am grateful to Howard Pickett for this insight and citation.
[83] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 138.
[84] Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 51.
[85] Ibid. Levinas also references the story of Cain and Abel in his chapter on substitution. See *Otherwise Than Being*, 117.

untransferability, and asymmetrical nature of responsibility is connected with Levinas's account of "substitution," which is a central theme in *Otherwise Than Being*. For Levinas, substitution is intrinsically tied to what it means for the self to be a subject because substitution—which is also my responsibility, since substitution and responsibility are for Levinas more or less synonymous—is uniquely mine. Substitution—to be disinterested, to be responsible, to be unequivocally *for* another person—is not an act; it is to be oneself.[86] The self is *sub-jectum*, subjected wholly to the Other, and in this subjection, finds its subjectivity and individuation.[87] While this seems paradoxical, the notion that I encounter my own uniqueness in responsibility to another person is not so unfamiliar. It seems implausible that I could ever know who "I" am or what individuates me in a particular way, were it not for other people.[88] In fact, for Levinas, individuation is *only* possible in substitution for the other. "Responsibility for another," Levinas explains, "is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, *has not awaited freedom*, in which a commitment to another would have been made."[89] Substitution is a non-choice that precedes all freedom, and insofar as one is responsible in substitution prior to the formation of an identity to which the self can lay claim, "I," as subject, always stand accused—I am always persecuted for my failure to fulfill my infinite responsibility.[90] I must answer "for everything and for everyone," and so I am, in this sense, a hostage in substitution.[91] Again, while this no doubt violent conceptualization seems absurd and even *un*ethical, a concrete example may help us understand what exactly Levinas means. If I walk past a shallow pond and see a child about to drown and die, I am compelled to wade into the pond and save the child's life at whatever the cost—that is, I *cannot help* my response,

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[86] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 117.
[87] Ibid., 116.
[88] Levinas, of course, would never demonstrate the point in this way. I nevertheless think it is helpful to draw on intuitive notions of individuation to show that what *seems* like a radical account of subjectivity and responsibility is not so radical after all.
[89] Ibid., 114. My emphasis.
[90] Ibid., 114.
[91] Ibid., 112.

for I am entirely subjected to this vulnerable other who nevertheless commands me to save her. In some more extreme instances, my sacrificial efforts may cause me some considerable harm; the ethical response, Levinas seems to tell us, is not necessarily easy or even bloodless. It is exactly this sacrifice, however, that makes me who I am. I realize that I simply *must* put myself at risk, and in my substitution for another, I find my identity, as it were.[92] Levinas perhaps states this most clearly when he explains that "the uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another."[93] Once more, substitution—and thereby responsibility—*is* subjectivity, and, at the same time, *precedes* the individuality I typically associate with subjectivity, insofar as who I am is found *through* and *for* the Other.[94]

The complicated and rather difficult notion of substitution really serves as a simple reminder that the Self is responsible before it is in fact a self. In his own terms, Levinas says that substitution rests heavily on this notion of "anteriority." Substitution ascribes an "extremely urgent […] obligation anachronously prior to any commitment," older than the a priori.[95] He returns to the "no prior commitment" theme continuously throughout *Otherwise Than Being*. While I have already alluded to this central feature of responsibility and explained how it problematizes responsibility for real-self theorists, I have yet to explain what we should make of it. Intuitively, such "before"-ness makes little sense. It is a mistake, however, not *just* to think of the immemorial and unrepresentable past that Levinas speaks of as an empirical past that one can point to on a timeline—this is an obvious error against which Levinas explicitly warns his reader. It is *also* mistaken to think of this "before" in temporal terms whatsoever. Michael Morgan puts forth the

[92] Levinas would most likely not use this vocabulary, which far too much evokes the Same. Nevertheless, much like Levinas, I am severely limited in the words I can use to describe his ideas. I humbly ask that the Levinasian scholar excuse me if I sometimes move beyond Levinas's own language.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., 114.
[95] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 101.

notion of the responsible self as a "transcendental condition […] for the possibility of everyday experience" as it is "social human existence."[96] On his account, insofar as the primordiality of responsibility is tied to the individuation of the ethical subject, it should be understood as necessary in order for my life to have "point and purpose." Levinas therefore impels us to consider "a feature of our lives that we regularly fail to grasp and hence a mode of existence that we fail to live or act on."[97] To Morgan's point, I would add that if we take seriously the idea of the responsible self as a transcendental condition for everyday experience, then everyday experience is necessarily imbued with inescapable normativity. In other words, the Levinasian account of the responsible self is exactly why I cannot escape continuous normative evaluations in my day-to-day life. It is impossible, Levinas asserts, to ascertain who I am without reference to my substitution for you, and this is an ethical—read, normative—relation.

Simply put, in the words of Paul Celan, whom Levinas quotes at the start of his chapter on substitution in *Otherwise Than Being*, "I am you, when I am I."[98] We can render Celan's statement somewhat differently to say, only when I am for another, am I really the "I" I *should* be.[99] To be responsible to another person, to substitute for the other person, to be accused, obsessed, persecuted, and subjected, all terms Levinas uses to describe substitution—this is not to say that I am responsible "before" I am an "I" in a literal, temporal sense, but that my relationship with the other person matters before I am who I ought to be and before my capacity to think and act as an responsible subject with a unique personality that I can call my own.

Even if we should be careful not to understand the before-ness that precedes individuation in temporal terms, I nevertheless call attention to our own births to show that, once again, this

[96] Michael Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas,* 130.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 99.
[99] I thank Howard Pickett for this helpful formulation of Celan's statement. Emphasis mine.

idea is not so unfamiliar. Before we can think and act as persons with distinct personalities, before we are technically *in the world*, we have a special relationship with our parents. This relationship quite obviously precedes our subjectivity and consequently speaks to what amounts to a relatively simple point made by Levinas. While I may be blind to the fact that my relationships with others matter before I discover my identity—and, likewise, to the need to respond to another person before whom I stand accused without justification— "it is always there, an aspect of me and my relationship with each and every other person, whether I realize it or not."[100] This is why I cannot call it quits, so to speak, in my ethical relationship with the Other. Ethics precedes the "I" to which I lay claim as the Self.

3.7: *LEVINASIAN RESPONSIBILITY AND POVERTY ISSUES*

However abstract it may at first seem, Levinasian responsibility is relevant to poverty issues. Through his phenomenological description of responsibility that differs significantly from standard common-sense and philosophical accounts, Levinas wakes us up, so to speak, to a foundational, existential component of our everyday lives. If responsibility precedes subjectivity, if another person summons me "before" I can ascertain who I am in a primordial sense, then I always, in whatever I do, either satisfy the demands of responsibility or fail to do so.[101] If we take this notion seriously, it should shock and concern us. For if I always stand accused before another person in the face-to-face encounter, what can I possibly say in my defense, should I choose to deafen my ears to the Other's summons? How can I justify my comfortable lifestyle while she dies from poverty-related causes that I know my efforts can relieve, and, in addition, when I know I am responsible for her death, which my substitution can prevent?[102] For Levinas, the witness who

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[100] Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, 131.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Compare this to a powerful claim made by Peter Singer in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality": "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it." In *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol. 1, no. 3 (1972), 231.

realizes her responsibility to another person, who understands that her substitution is uniquely hers and that her subjectivity depends upon her relation to this other person, responds in testimony to the other, "Here I am."[103] Here I am—that is, concerned and exposed, aware that I cannot ever fulfill my responsibility, and yet nevertheless present before you, the Other who cries for justice.

When it comes to poverty-related injustices, the presence of the "here I am" is absent all too often. It is absent when I claim that my work schedule precludes my participation in social justice efforts, or when I make excuses for why I never stopped to help the homeless person I encountered on the street. It is even absent in poverty alleviation efforts themselves, when kindhearted people strip the poor of their sense of self-worth in their attempt to "serve" and help disadvantaged populations. These examples related to the "here I am" allude to two notable consequences for moral deliberative approaches to poverty issues. First, the "here I am" associated with Levinasian responsibility necessitates beneficence toward the poor.[104] While the "here I am" seems to lack the activity and imperative concern we often want to project in our response to poverty-related injustices, the presence of the "here I am" is not just an ethereal orientation toward the Good or an empty intention to show up when the other person summons me.[105] To be responsible in the responsivity of the "here I am" is to *enact* responsibility in concrete ways. It is "the conversion of the response […] into the approach of other"—to actually *be there,* ready to serve, when the other person calls upon me.[106] This beneficent response can manifest itself in a myriad of ways. On the political level, which I address in more detail in Section Five, the "here I am" may take the form of redistributive tax efforts to counter material deprivation that threatens

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Levinas, of course, avoids such clearly articulated prescriptions, yet I nevertheless posit that the ethical sentiment here is similar.

[103] Levinas*, Otherwise Than Being*, 145.

[104] While Tom Beauchamp and James Childress put forth their four principles of justice in relation to biomedical ethics, their principles of beneficence and autonomy, in particular, are nevertheless useful here. See Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[105] Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 120.

[106] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 12.

poor individuals' basic needs, such as wealth, income, food, etc. It may also take the form of capabilities promotion—that is, the promotion of capacities needed for education, health, adequate leisure time, adequate income, societal affiliation, and control over one's environment, just to name a few.[107] The point, however, is that the "here I am" does *not* simply refer to non-maleficence. To the contrary, responsibility for the other is, in Levinas's words, when "activity and passivity coincide."[108] Positive action, necessarily imbued with a subjected passivity, is required.

The second practical example to which I call attention (wherein I point out how the presence of the "here I am" is absent when those who attempt to serve the poor do so in a rather imperialistic manner), elucidates the need for the appreciation of the Other's alterity that Levinasian responsibility demands. As noted in Section Two when discussing the face-to-face encounter, the Other is pure difference—what Levinas calls alterity.[109] She lies beyond my comprehension and inhabits a perspective I can never know. Those who claim to know what the poor want and who speak on their behalf erroneously reduce the incomprehensibility of the Other to the Same. In Levinas's terms, they thematize what is unthematizable. This failure to appreciate alterity constitutes an unethical affront the autonomy of the other person. Levinasian responsibility, on the contrary, insofar as it derives from the ethical encounter with she who is *not* me in any way, shape, or form, respects the autonomy of destitute persons. It appreciates the other person's control over her life, her individuality, and her selfhood. Moreover, since responsibility is imposed on me by the Other, the responsivity of the "here I am" cannot possibly dictate the way in which the other should live. It is the *Other* who summons me; I am in no place to make demands of any kind upon her. Levinasian responsibility therefore serves to counter the all-too-familiar savior complex that speaks before it listens, looks down rather than looks up, and claims to know before the truth of

[107] See Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 33-34.
[108] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 115.
[109] See p. 7.

the matter is disclosed. It re-trains us in such a way as to avoid participating in self-congratulatory poverty reduction campaigns. In this sense, the "here I am" associated with Levinasian responsibility not only necessitates beneficence toward the poor, but also promotes the autonomy of poor others.

4: *UTILITARIAN AND KANTIAN RESPONSIBILITY*

I now return to the prior discussion of prospective responsibility and responsibilities as duties according to utilitarian and Kantian accounts of responsibility.[110] Levinasian responsibility is instructive to these accounts in important ways. I will treat utilitarian and Kantian attitudes toward responsibility in turn. With respect to utilitarianism, I claim that while utilitarians share with Levinas the view that responsibility entails an endless subjection to the concerns of others, utilitarianism implicitly asks that individuals lose their sense of selves—what Bernard Williams characterizes as "an attack on [a person's integrity][111]—whereas Levinas associates the very notion of subjectivity with responsibility to others. With respect to Kantianism, I claim that insofar as the third formulation of the categorical imperative and its formula of autonomy stipulates that the rational moral agent gives *to herself* the moral law through her autonomous will, this account of responsibility contrasts Levinas's view that responsibility is imposed on me through my encounter with the destitute face of the Other. I maintain that Levinasian responsibility is distinct from and instructive to both of these accounts. Unlike utilitarianism, Levinasian responsibility does not strip the subjected "I" of its subjectivity and individuation, which we have reason to value. And unlike Kantianism, Levinasian responsibility avoids the potentiality that the rational moral agent discerns a rather limited set of responsibilities upon solipsistic reflection on the moral law. The Levinasian subject, quite unlike the Kantian rational agent, does not stand at the center of the moral universe;

[110] See pp. 24-25.
[111] Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 115.

her responsibilities derive from the plea born of the essential poverty and destitution of the Other.

4.1: *THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVITY: LEVINAS AND UTILITARIAN RESPONSIBILITY*

On the one hand, Levinas and utilitarians ostensibly share a similar view of responsibility. Utilitarianism is a kind of consequentialism; whether an action is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act, as opposed to the circumstances or the intrinsic nature of the act or what happens before the act.[112] While, for simplicity's sake, I focus here on act utilitarianism, my comments about how Levinasian responsibility is instructive to utilitarianism apply to other forms of utilitarianism as well. Act utilitarians claim that I am morally required to promote the most preferences or satisfactions of the most people. Act utilitarianism, it should be noted, cannot easily distinguish the different categories of moral permissibility, impermissibility, obligation, and supererogation. In effect, act utilitarianism implies that I do wrong each time I fail to perform an action that maximizes the most preferences or satisfactions for the most people. Since it makes the optimal action obligatory and the suboptimal action wrong, act utilitarianism expands the realm of that which is morally impermissible, collapses the distinction between the permissible and the obligatory, and eliminates the possibility of the supererogatory.[113] My responsibilities according to act utilitarianism, then, are more or less endless. Moreover, as John Stuart Mill, one of utilitarianism's foremost exponents, writes in *Utilitarianism*, "the happiness that forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator."[114] My responsibilities, then, are endless with respect to the happiness, preferences, or satisfactions of others. Insofar as the ideal

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[112] Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Consequentialism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Zalta (2015): online.
[113] David Brink, "Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Zalta (2014): online.
[114] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. by George Sher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), 17.

utilitarian agent is a "disinterested and benevolent spectator" with responsibilities determined by the needs of others, utilitarianism's account of responsibility notably parallels Levinasian responsibility.

Bernard Williams, in "A Critique of Utilitarianism," elucidates how the demands of others impact the responsibility of the utilitarian agent. He writes:

> On the utilitarian view, the undesirable projects of other people as much determine […] one's decisions as the desirable ones do: if those people were not there, or had different projects, the causal nexus would be different, and it is the actual state of the causal nexus which determines the decision. The determination to an indefinite degree of my decisions by other people's projects is just another aspect of *my unlimited responsibility* to act for the best in a causal framework formed to a considerable extent by their projects.[115]

It is notable here how Williams characterizes utilitarianism's account of responsibility as "unlimited." It is also notable how, similar to Levinas's phenomenological description of responsibility, the projects of other people seem to impose themselves on the utilitarian agent Williams describes. Williams also claims that on the utilitarian view, the projects of others will more often than not override the preferences or satisfaction I derive from my own projects, so that even if the projects of others conflict with some project of mine, "the satisfaction to [me] of fulfilling [my] project, and any satisfactions to others of [my] doing, have already been through the calculating device and have been found inadequate."[116] On this point, too, the utilitarian account of responsibility intrinsically tied to the projects of others closely resembles Levinasian responsibility, insofar as what *I* want to pursue is secondary to that which I know will benefit other people.

Whatever the similarities between utilitarian responsibility and Levinasian responsibility, the utilitarian account severely undervalues the importance of both subjectivity and individuation. In his critique of utilitarianism, Williams points out that the ideal utilitarian agent is not at all

[115] Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," 115. My emphasis.
[116] Ibid., 115-116.

someone with a unique identity and robust personality. To the contrary, he is at the whims of the mechanistic calculations that utilitarianism prescribes. Whatever actions he performs "will depend entirely on the facts, on what persons with what projects and what potential satisfactions there are within calculable reach of the casual levers near which he finds himself."[117] Williams rightly characterizes the demands of utilitarianism as "an attack on [a person's integrity]." Utilitarian responsibility effectively strips a person of

> projects and attitudes which in some cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about. […] It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions.[118]

Levinasian responsibility, on the other hand, while no less demanding than utilitarian responsibility, avoids reducing the subjected "I" to a mechanistic tool through which utilitarian calculations impersonally run. For Levinas, responsibility is synonymous with subjectivity; rather than lose myself in the projects of other people, I discover who I am in responsibility to the Other. Recall the words of Paul Celan, quoted earlier:[119] "I am you, when I am I," or, as I also rendered his statement, only when I am for another, am I really the "I" I should be. According to Levinas's phenomenological description, responsibility by no means alienates me from my actions or the source of my actions. Quite the opposite, it in fact constitutes my unique identity and robust personality as a human subject.[120] In this sense, Levinas's account of responsibility is instructive to the utilitarian account while still retaining the moral exigency of utilitarianism that those who are concerned with poverty alleviation might find attractive in utilitarian responsibility.

4.2: *THE PROBLEM OF THE SELF AND MORAL LAW: LEVINAS AND KANTIAN*

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[117] Ibid., 114-115.
[118] Ibid., 116.
[119] See pp. 32-33.
[120] These are not terms Levinas uses. See p. 92, note 31 for my brief defense of the use of such colloquial terms.

RESPONSIBILITY

The Kantian view of responsibility is rather different from Levinasian responsibility *prima facie*.[121] Unlike utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism, Kantian deontology does not judge the morality of choices based on the states of affairs those choices bring about. Instead, Kantian deontology calls for the prescription of moral duties, or what I have called responsibilities. What makes an action right, then, is not that it maximizes the most preferences or satisfactions of the most people, but that it conforms with a universalizable moral duty. Insofar as Kantian duties are universal, each and every rational agent must obey them.[122] In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant makes an important distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. I have perfect duties about which I have no choice to fulfill and imperfect duties to myself and others about which I have some choice how to fulfill. While I am morally required to meet both, these duties are limited in number, even if my imperfect duties, such as the imperfect duty to cultivate one's own talents, can never truly be completed.[123] My responsibilities to other people are therefore not endless or unlimited in the Levinasian sense.

While Kantian responsibility appears *prima facie* quite unlike Levinasian responsibility, however, a certain interpretation of Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative ostensibly indicates that Levinas and Kant do not understand responsibility so differently. The second formulation of the categorical imperative states: "so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." It therefore implies that the Kantian should be committed to benevolence, and Kant

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[121] In this subsection, I contrast Levinasian responsibility with a form of Kantian deontology, and not necessarily Kant himself. A particular type of Kantian may therefore object to the version of Kantianism I put forth here.

[122] Larry Alexander and Michael Moore, "Deontological Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Zalta (2016): online.

[123] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4:423, 33.

himself asserts that there is indeed an imperfect duty to benevolence in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. Insofar as the "perfect practitioner" of Kantianism has a duty to increase her moral perfection in addition to the duty to benevolence, the Kantian's moral duties are then technically unlimited with respect to *how much* they dominate her life. In other words, if actions in accordance with such duties are considered virtuous, then the more the Kantian performs those actions, the more virtuous she is.[124] Nevertheless, this certainly does not require the kind of sacrifice inherent in Levinasian responsibility. Kantianism by no means demands that *every* person become a moral saint, to borrow a term used by Susan Wolf.[125] To conclude, then, the extent to which Kant thinks our responsibilities extend depends in no small part on how the Kantian interprets the role of imperfect duties in his overall system. While it is not my aim to explore this question further, I believe that it is safe to say that Kantian responsibility is not infinite or unlimited in the Levinasian sense.

The most important difference between Kantian responsibility and Levinasian responsibility, and the way in which Levinas is instructive to Kantian responsibility, is centered on Kant's third formulation of the categorical imperative: the principle of autonomy. The principle of autonomy states that "the will of every rational being [is] a will giving universal law."[126] The Kantian rational agent self-legislates the moral law—that is, she uses her ability to reason to discern the perfect and imperfect duties that she then uses to govern her moral behavior. Kant clarifies this point when he says:

> If we look back upon all previous efforts that have ever been made to discover the principle of morality, we need not wonder now why all of them had to fail. It was seen that the human being is bound to laws by his duty, but it never occurred to them that he is subject only to laws given by himself but still universal and that he is bound only to act in conformity with his own will, which, however, in accordance with nature's end is a will

[124] Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," in *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. 79, no. 8 (1982), 430.
[125] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:432, 40. See Wolf, "Moral Saints."
[126] Ibid.

giving universal law.[127]

For the Levinasian ethicist (Levinas himself does not critique Kantian deontology, though he does engage with Kantian thought more broadly), the notion that I use my own ability to reason to discern my duties or responsibilities invites the dangerous potentiality that I will decide upon a rather limited set of responsibilities, after what amounts to solipsistic reflection on the moral law. While the Kantian will no doubt protest that the duties that the rational agent gives to herself must be universalizable, and that this essential condition "checks" the kind of self-centered egoism with which the Levinasian is so concerned, the fact remains that Kant insists via the principle of autonomy that the rational agent is subject to laws that arise from her own will. Etymologically speaking, "autonomy," from the Greek *auto*, which means "self," and *nomos*, which means "law," quite literally means "self-governed." From a Levinasian perspective, the self-legislation of the moral law inherent in Kantianism is an unethical and solipsistic reduction of the Other to the Same, no matter the condition of universalizability. I am not subject to laws that arise from my own will; for Levinas, I am subjected to the Other.

This seems rather intuitively accurate. I have a sense of my duties only after intersubjective discourse with others first and foremost, and I hardly ever determine my responsibilities after solitary reflection on some ethereal notion of the moral law. In poor and destitute others—this is wherein our true responsibilities lie. Levinas's phenomenological description of responsibility is therefore instructive to Kantian responsibility. I do not stand at the center of the moral universe, as it were. Even with the help of reason, my ability to accurately discern what duties I need to fulfill is no doubt severely limited. It only seems appropriate that I should therefore listen to the needs and concerns of other people before I decide on what it is that I owe them in responsibility.

5: *CRITIQUES OF RESPONSIBILITY AND LEVINASIAN JUSTICE*

[127] Ibid.

Despite its plausible connections with poverty issues, Levinasian responsibility manifest in the face-to-face encounter does not only seem impractical when we step back to think about our complicated interpersonal relationships with many other people, it strikes us as decidedly *un*ethical. Responsibility effectively catches us in a Derridean "double-bind" when we ask, in response to Levinas, "What about all the other others?" To be sure, I might recognize and embrace that I am infinitely, undeniably, and asymmetrically responsible to the Other in the face-to-face encounter. Am I not, however, responsible in the same way to every other Other that exists in the *real* world? Nevertheless, if I am in fact responsible to all others, then my sacrifice on behalf of one person will come at the expense of my potential substitution for the other person for whom I am *also* responsible. Such a situation is an unsolvable ethical conundrum, which Levinas characterizes as "troubled" and "a problem." Logicians call this a "constructive dilemma." In simple terms, the introduction of other others in the face-to-face encounter, to whom I am just as responsible as the "first" Other, introduces a series of deliberative problems for our ethical lives.[128] Even in substitution, even in my *absolute sacrifice* to the Other, insofar as there *are* other others in our world, it seems that I am forced to make a choice that necessitates calculation. And calculation, for Levinas, stands outside the ethical encounter of the face-to-face encounter since it reconciles alterity with the Same.

The skeptic of Levinasian responsibility and proponent of autonomous self-empowerment may express another equally important concern about our *own* welfare in substitution to the Other. No doubt, this is an appropriate intuitive response. I should, it seems, take care of myself; after all, I, too, am a person, and I matter just as much as the Other for whose death I am responsible. To summarize, then, those skeptical of Levinasian responsibility might express two important critiques that problematize his account, even if they sympathize with its most salient elements. First, it

[128] Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 168-169.

seems that in substitution I am forced make an *un*ethical choice that involves calculation in an incalculable situation, and second, it appears that in substitution I am forced to discount my status as a person who matters. For Levinas, these ostensible objections involve questions of justice.

4.1: *THE ENTRY OF THE THIRD PARTY*

The fact that I inhabit a world with *many* others introduces a series of deliberative problems for my other-centeredness. When faced with the realization that there are many others, how do I make the impossible choice between the Other to whom I am infinitely, undeniably, and asymmetrically responsible, and the other others for whom I know I must also care? In this section, I examine the question as to how to apprehend "the comparison of the incomparable," the thematization of what Levinas says can*not* be thematized, since each human person is intrinsically and infinitely valuable.[129]

Levinas realizes that we do not live in a world limited to my face-to-face encounter with a singular Other. "If there were two of us in the world," he points out, "there wouldn't be any problem."[130] As it is no doubt apparent, however, we live amidst many others, before whom we stand accused, all of whom summon our response. Levinas describes the apprehension of this phenomenon as the "entrance" of the third party (it should be noted that the so-called "entrance" of the third party is not an "empirical fact;" in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the third party as "the whole of humanity." We are always already in the midst of other others, and the problems that the third party introduces are always already salient in our ethical lives).[131] The third party is both other than the neighbor before whom I was "first" subjected and, in addition, *another* neighbor before whom I am called to answer. In this way, Levinas claims that the third party introduces "a contradiction," since a problem arises with my responsibility: to whom must I answer

[129] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 158.
[130] Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love" in *Entre Nous*, 106.
[131] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 158; *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

first, and in total?[132] The entrance of the third party, Levinas writes, is "the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with *justice*?" The presence of the other Other therefore precipitates the need for calculation, for order, for "comparison," "thematization," and "the intelligibility of a system."[133] With the entrance of the third party, responsibility cannot move infinitely in one direction, as it did within the face-to-face encounter. "It is only when we recognize our fundamental responsibility to each and every other person," Michael Morgan writes, "that we see what justice, moral norms, policies, and practices mean to us and our lives, what their point is."[134]

Such moral norms, policies, and practices are of the order of comparison and thematization to which Levinas refers. They allow us to respond to the needs of the third party who *also* presents me with a destitute face and calls forth my responsibility. This is a critically important point. I will return to the question of how Levinasian justice is practically applicable in the public and political realm below. For now, however, it is sufficient to note that the entrance of the third party neither makes it permissible—in a Levinasian, ethical sense, that is—to abandon my responsibility to the "first" Other in order to respond to the summons of the other Other, nor makes it permissible to discount the summons of the other Other with reference to my responsibility to the "first" Other. In other words, if I decide to compare other persons on some evaluative basis, or if I try to formulate some structures and systems in order make sense of this "constructive dilemma," then I have exited from the realm of the ethical into that of the political. And yet, I *must* do this; there is no other way for me to escape the Derridean "double-bind." As Morgan notes, "Ethics is fundamental; politics and political justice are necessary."[135]

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[132] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 157.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Levinas*, 109.
[135] Ibid., 109.

4.2: *THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE OTHER TO ME*

The second plausible concern raised by the skeptic of Levinasian responsibility is no less important. The liberal proponent of autonomous self-empowerment will no doubt raise an eyebrow to the radical notion of substitution discussed in Section Three. However, with respect to the skeptic's concern about *her own* worth, Levinas is keen to note that the responsibility manifest in the face-to-face encounter does not at all mean that I, as an individuated subject, do not matter. Just as I am subjected to the Other, the Other is, in theory, subjected to me. To repeat a point made earlier, however, this is simply not Levinas's theme. His philosophical project is to describe in phenomenological terms what responsibility looks like when we are ethical. His reluctance to dwell on what the Other owes me does not at all indicate that we should never be worried about our own individual welfare. Levinas only means to demonstrate that to counter the demand imposed on me by the Other with my own demand, to respond to her summons not with "here I am," but with "must you not also answer to me?" is to reduce the Other to the Same.

Compare this different locus of emphasis, for example, to an encounter between a parent and her child. The child has just punched another child in response to some physical offense; she was attacked, and she hit back in order to even the score. Perhaps this parent is committed, reasonably so, to the rather broad notion that physical violence is not the best way to solve petty interpersonal conflicts between children. The parent therefore chastises her child for her needlessly violent reaction. "You should *not* hit other people," she instructs the child. "But he hit me first!" the child responds in earnest. "*She* started it." The parent, however, persists in her chastisement, since the *point* at the heart of the matter does not at all concern the actions of the other child. Does the parent therefore mean that the child should never defend herself when attacked? Of course not.[136] At the moment, however, emphasis on the child's right to self-defense is simply not her

[136] See pp. 52-53 for Levinas's views on violence. He was by no means a pacifist.

"theme." While this comparison is by no means perfect, it helps us understand why Levinas does not focus on the responsibility incumbent on the Other to me. When I encounter the destitute, poor face of the Other in the face-to-face encounter, I do not, he insists, think first about what this vulnerable person owes *me*. That is, when I stumble upon a child about to drown in a shallow pond on my way to class, my first reaction is other-oriented. I simply *must* save her.

Moreover, Levinas makes clear that with the entrance of the third party, I also realize that the one for whom I am "at first" responsible is responsible, *in turn*, for the other Other—i.e., the third party—as well. The third party, then, makes me one person amidst other persons who all participate in a complicated network of responsibility. I can now make a justice claim *for myself*. To be sure, Levinas writes, "it is only thanks to God that, a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached as an Other by the others, that is, 'for myself.'"[137] I, like the others, can now demand justice— "there is also justice for me."[138] Those same moral norms, policies, and practices that come about as a result of the entrance of the third party apply to me in the same way that they apply to other persons. When justice systematizes responsibility, Levinas reassures us, it levels down the asymmetrical responsibility of the face-to-face encounter. "The relationship with the third party," he writes, "is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at."[139]

The skeptic therefore has far less cause for concern than she at first expressed in response to Levinasian responsibility. I *do* matter. Nevertheless, if I focus exclusively, or even primarily, on what others owe me, then I risk falling into a destructive solipsism. Indeed, such a potentiality is why Levinas refrains from emphasizing this point— "I do not like mentioning it for it should be

[137] Ibid., 158.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.

completed by other considerations," he admits.[140] At the same time, however, this resistance to dwell upon what others owe me testifies to why Levinas is so relevant to poverty issues.[141] Levinas wants me to keep my eyes on the prize, as it were. He wants me to remain focused on the Other to whom I am responsible rather than on the Other's responsibility to me, which distracts me from what is most important. All too often, self-concerned and solipsistic egoism works to counter my openness to the call of the Other. In my selfish self-absorption, I attempt to imperialistically reduce all that is not the Self to the Same, to make myself the center of attention—in a word, to be self-centered. When I, who stands accused, paradoxically make demands upon the Other in a vain attempt to possess her and incorporate her into the Same (i.e., myself), I no doubt miss the unnoticed or repressed perspective—the marginalized perspective, even—from which the Other imposes responsibility on me. When I am other-centered, on the contrary, and take seriously the alterity of another person, I allow her to disclose "things [I] had not seen before," such as the material or economic character of human experience with which I might be unfamiliar.[142] The Other, the poor one, reveals to me in the vulnerability of the face-to-face encounter what I do not, and perhaps cannot ever, know.

It is important to note that realization that I am one amidst others and that responsibility functions differently with the entrance of the third party than in the face-to-face encounter is not "to find [the Other's] order put on me relativized or cancelled. It is to discover the exigency for justice, for an order among responsibilities."[143] In this sense, justice by no means stands apart from the face-to-face encounter; rather, the face-to-face encounter constitutes the grounds for Levinasian justice. For Levinas, justice would make little sense—indeed, it would be impossible—

[140] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 99.
[141] Parts of this discussion echo claims made on pp. 35-36.
[142] Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Levinas*, 90.
[143] Alphonso Lingis, "Translator's Introduction" in *Otherwise Than Being*, xli.

were it not for the encounter with the face, and it is just this ethical encounter that restrains the worst calculations of justice. "Justice is born of [the] charity" essential to responsibility, Levinas explains, and they are "inseparable and simultaneous."[144] While Levinas does not articulate a positive and substantive theory of justice, he nevertheless maintains that it is *not*, contrary to the claims of political realists, simply "a legality regulating human masses, from which a technique of social equilibrium is drawn, harmonizing antagonistic forces." Justice is "warped" without responsibility, and responsibility, in turn, "[watches] over" and "corrects" justice.[145]

4.3: *A PRAGMATIC OBJECTION*

There are many philosophers in the analytic tradition who believe that Levinasian ethics is not at all useful when it comes to our responsibilities in public life. As I conclude, it is necessary to address this most pointed criticism leveled at Levinas that, if such a characterization of Levinasian ethics is correct—i.e., that it is impractical, not truly ethics, not suitable for the public sphere, etc.—justifies Anglo-American ethicists' refusal to incorporate Levinas's description of responsibility into their ethical work on poverty issues. The American philosopher Richard Rorty perhaps captures this criticism most succinctly when, in *Achieving Our Country*, he writes that "the notion of 'infinite responsibility' formulated by Emmanuel Levinas […] may be useful to some of us in our individual quests for private perfection. When we take up our public responsibilities, however, the infinite and the unrepresentable are merely nuisances. Thinking of our responsibilities in these terms is as much of a stumbling-block to effective political organization as is the sense of sin."[146] If Levinasian ethics is not useful for practical ethical discourse, or if it is only useful in our individual lives, then it cannot be mobilized to address poverty issues. In effect, if

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[144] Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 107; for more on charity and responsibility, see p. 113 (of *Entre Nous*), where Levinas says, "I have a grave view of Agape in terms of responsibility for the other."
[145] Ibid., 121, 108.
[146] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 97.

most readers find Rorty persuasive, then my claim about Levinas's relevancy to poverty issues is in peril.

To be sure, Levinas himself states that his project is not to construct an ethics with clearly delineated rules and prescriptions. As I have repeatedly noted, his philosophical task is to articulate a phenomenology of responsibility when the Self is ethical. On the other hand, while Levinas concedes that even if practical ethics is not his "own theme," he also says that "one can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said"—i.e., on the face-to-face encounter and his notion of responsibility.[147] We might still call into question this claim made by Levinas, especially if we take seriously, as I think we should, his notion that ethics in its most primordial iteration is unthematizable. Moreover, there may be reason to suspect the universality of the calculations prescribed by ethicists, utilitarians and Kantians alike. We may share Simone de Beauvoir's concern about what she identifies as a central paradox of the human condition—namely, that people "know themselves to be the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means."[148] Perhaps, however, Levinasian justice offers a plausible and persuasive way out of this conundrum, which, Rorty mistakenly concludes, makes Levinasian ethics useless when it comes to "effective political organization." For Levinas, the realm of justice, insofar as it necessitates calculating, weighing, and judging, is *not* the realm of the ethical. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, the ethical encounter of the face-to-face constitutes the grounds for justice, and in this sense, Levinasian responsibility is relevant to the poverty issues that only politics can effectively address.

Even if Levinas does not articulate a robust theory of justice, he nevertheless offers a number of familiar political ideas in his own scattered comments on what justice entails. First and

[147] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 90.
[148] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 9.

foremost, the assessment and comparison involved in matters that concern justice are of the order of "politics." In effect, justice is synonymous with politics and its correlates, "society" and "the State and its institutions."[149] Contrary to Rorty's claim, then, Levinasian responsibility is in fact relevant to public responsibilities and political organization insofar as it informs and makes possible any conception of justice and, relatedly, political theories and ideas. Second, Levinas asserts that from our concern with justice "the idea of equity appears, on which the idea of objectivity is based."[150] Equality of persons and political decisions made from an objective or impartial moral perspective are thus constitutive elements of Levinasian justice well-known to liberalism's proponents. It is important to note, however, that unlike political liberals' theories of justice, Levinasian justice is rooted in the responsibility manifest in the face-to-face encounter. Indeed, "justice *only* has meaning if it retains the spirit of dis-interedness which animates the idea of responsibility for the other [person]."[151] Finally, in an interview on "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," Levinas himself claims that there may be "room for a just state in what I say of the relationship to the other." Again, in explicit contrast to Rorty's characterization of Levinasian ethics, he says that "there is a possible harmony between ethics and the state," yet only if love, which he identifies in terms of responsibility for the Other, keeps justice in check.[152] Of course, Rorty may just as well balk at such a claim. It is certainly plausible to see, however, with Levinas's own comments in mind, how the consequences of his phenomenological description of the ethical encounter are by no means restricted to the private sphere.

4.5: *LEVINAS ON PRACTICAL POLITICAL ISSUES*

Levinas himself at times articulated political pronouncements that proponents of

[149] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 159.
[150] Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 104.
[151] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 99.
[152] Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 120-121.

Levinasian justice can and should make in the political realm. Take, for instance, his comments about Zionism. Levinas supported the establishment of the State of Israel, which he claimed needed to be committed to the "difficult and erudite work of justice."[153] He is keenly aware that adoration and apprehension of the State as an ultimate end in and of itself will lapse into a destructive nationalism and introduce the corruptive impulse of power politics. Responsibility must, he asserts, provide the grounds for justice in the political realm. "Each nation must behave as though it alone had to answer for all," Levinas writes, evoking the phenomenological language of the face-to-face. Each nation is chosen, and each nation has a "responsibility which [it] cannot shirk."[154]

On a similarly practical note, Levinas was not a pacifist. Despite his insistence that the face issues the command, "You shall not commit murder," the entrance of the third party and my responsibility to her necessitates that I cannot a priori reject the use of violence in pursuit of justice. In a Talmudic lecture titled "Judaism and Revolution," Levinas claims that violence is unavoidable in some cases. "Unquestionably, violent action against Evil is necessary," he asserts. With reference to the authority of Rabbi Eleazar, he says that "if I am violent it is because violence is needed to put an end to violence."[155] The doctrine of non-violence, then, risks complicity in the kind of violence perpetrated by tyrannical forces like the Nazis and unjust institutions. While one can reasonably contest Levinas's attitude toward violence, the point is that, with respect to another practical political issue, Levinasian justice born out of responsibility is quite relevant in the public, political realm. Rorty's critical characterization of Levinas's ethics, it seems, is simply not accurate.

6: *CONCLUSION*

My aim in this study has been quite simple. When ethicists consider moral theories in

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[153] Emmanuel Levinas, "The State of Israel and the Religion of Israel," in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. by Sean Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 217.
[154] Ibid., 224.
[155] Emmanuel Levinas, "Judaism and Revolution," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114.

relation to poverty-related issues, they should look to the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. His account of responsibility is not just relevant to poverty concerns, it also distinct from and instructive to utilitarian and Kantian accounts of responsibility. Moreover, Levinas's conception of justice makes his ethics quite applicable in the political domain. At the moment, however, very few ethicists draw upon Levinas in poverty studies. On the one hand, analytic philosophers are reluctant to wrestle with his esoteric and hyperbolic rhetoric. Bernard Williams, for example, whose useful critique of utilitarianism I cite in Section Four, does not even mention Levinas's name in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Likewise, continental philosophers are reluctant to wade into the realm of ethical rules and prescriptions, no matter how much they value and appreciate Levinas as a thinker. Beyond this, Levinas may well be, as Colin Davis notes one French commentator claims, "too well and too little known, too often schematized and too rarely understood adequately."[156] While his work is so often cited as "the postmodern ethics" postmodernism so desperately needed, only a handful of ethicists have been keen to use Levinas in an effort to make normative political claims. By my count, only one scholar has explicitly connected Levinas to poverty issues in particular.[157]

This paper cannot adequately address this serious deficiency. Nevertheless it can, I hope, embolden ethicists concerned with poverty issues to take a second, or even a first look at Levinas's ethical work. Many questions about Levinasian responsibility's relationship with justice remain. How Levinasian justice explicitly addresses low levels of education, racial inequality, social exclusion, income-inequality, and other forms of material deprivation is by no means clear. Does a theory of Levinasian justice look more like Rawlsian contractarianism or Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen's capabilities approach? Perhaps it most closely resembles Reinhold Niebuhr's conception of justice, insofar as love and its impossible demands correct justice, and thus "the way

[156] Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 121.
[157] Namely: Eduard Jordaan, *Responsibility, Indifference, and Global Poverty: A Levinasian Perspective* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006).

of love may be the only way to justice"?[158] Whatever the case may be, the formulation of a theory of Levinasian justice is no doubt the next step in the endeavor to relate Levinas's ethical work to poverty issues. In a very real way, this study is an attempt to convince the reader to do just that.

[158] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 266, 263.

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