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The Aesthetico-ethical subject: anOther narrative about being ethically responsible.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper builds on work I presented at the PESA conference in 2007, which moved through both aesthetic and ethical theory to generate a new theory of creative integrity around the issues of autonomy, agency and authenticity. This preliminary theorizing had its origins in my undergraduate ethics classroom where I was confronted with advertising students who resisted the idea of being taught ethics, along with all the philosophical ethical theories traditionally used to do this.

Based on a reading of the reflective journal submitted by my students, I concluded that students have a tendency to tell themselves certain stories about ethics. These personal narratives are not constructive and limit their ability to act responsibly. These dis-abling narratives coalesce around the issues of *autonomy*, *agency* and *authenticity*. Around the question of *autonomy*, students either, a) see ethics as a limit to their artistic freedom and therefore argue that they should be able to do anything they want in the name of art, or, b) they completely relinquish ownership of the creative process claiming that they have to do whatever the client wants. In terms of *agency*, students believe that they are unable ‘make a difference’, that there are too many social problems, that the problems are too big, that they wouldn’t know where to start, and even that it’s ‘not their problem’ as creative practitioners. In relation to *authenticity*, students either favour ‘objectivity’ and believe that personal values should be divorced from professional creative practice, or they favour ‘self-expression’, and run the risk of creating self-indulgence works that do not speak to society. Given the evidence that students’ personal narratives around ethical responsibility are not conducive to ethical action, a robust ethical theory will need to address the question of a subject’s ability to respond. Such an ethical theory will need to challenge unresponsive personal narratives and it will need to tell us a new story about what it is to be an ethical subject.

My work then, is ultimately about producing a pedagogically useful theory of ethical responsibility. However the current paper primarily addresses the need for a theory of ethical responsibility that facilitates student’s *ability-to-respond*. It is focused on creating a theoretical foundation which will enable students to not only understand their responsibility to and for the Other, but to also recognize their ability to take meaningful *action* in response to the ethical demands of others in society. The paper will take as its starting point the specific *inability* of students to respond and will then go on to explore the ways in which specific ethical theories limit our ability to respond. Finally, the paper responds to the need for a theory of ethical responsiveness and response-ability, by proposing that the ethically responsible subject should be reconstructed around theories of aesthetics – an aesthetico-ethical subject.

The story will begin with Levinas – the father of ethical responsibility, who gave a name and a voice to our fundamental, pre-rational responsibility to the Other. Levinasians claim that “Levinas’s ‘ethics’ is unrefutable” (Hutchens 2004:6). Hutchens however argues that despite Levinas’s deliberately impenetrable, ungraspable discourse, Levinas’s text is calling “Challenge me, criticize me, above all RESPOND TO ME” (2004:7). I am therefore opening a dialogue with Levinas’s ethics of responsibility by way of aesthetics. I am provisionally challenging his notion

of 'ethics as first philosophy' and suggest that Levinas's demand for responsibility is characterized by an *inability* to respond to the Other. The subject implied by Levinas lacks responsiveness, response-ability and social response-ability. Co-opting a number of theorists, such as Heidegger, Dewey, Schiller, Kant, as well as contemporary works by Elaine Scarry and Lisa Guenther, I play with the idea of '*aesthetics* as first ethics'. The aesthetic subject is active rather than passive, affirmed rather than accused, and socially interdependent rather than dependant. I argue that the aesthetic dimension of our pre-ontological encounter with the face of the other is what makes the subject able to respond and take deliberate ethical action in the world.

LEVINAS

Emmanuel Levinas's work on ethical responsibility represents one of the most substantial and radically divergent contributions to modern ethical theory. Levinas is not so much concerned with ontological questions about who the subject is, but rather with the extent to which ethicality comes *before* the subject as it is traditionally understood in western philosophy (Hand 1989:5). For Levinas, ethics is pre-ontological. Prior to the rational, knowing, autonomous subject is the subject's debt to the Other. The subject is always already entirely responsible for the other. Ethicality for Levinas is the call for responsibility that we encounter in the face of the Other. The face of the other is an 'overflowing, excess of meaning' that exceeds my ability to comprehend their being (Manning 1993:111). The face exceeds my comprehension. It cannot be conceptualized, totalized, grasped. Levinas's 'ethics of ethics' locates questions of ethical responsibility prior to questions of being (Hutchens 2004:17). For Levinas, as indicated by his work entitled "Ethics as first philosophy" (Levinas 1989:76), ethics comes before philosophy, before traditional ontological questions about being. Before the self who can ask questions about its own being, there is the becoming-subject that *is* only to the extent that it is inescapably responsible for the Other.

LIMITS OF LEVINAS

Historically specific

Whilst there isn't the space to fully develop this theme, it is worth mentioning, and problematizing, the historical specificity of Levinas's theory of ethical responsibility; and likewise, the equally specific nature of contemporary ethical demands. Levinas's work can be read as a direct response to his experiences, as a Lithuanian Jew, and a prisoner of war, during World War II. The current call for responsibility is dominated by the issues of global warming and environmental sustainability. It is an issue fuelled by a threat of what *might* happen rather than an atrocity that one has lived through; and it is necessarily a 'universal' issue that demands that every subject make changes, both big and small, in the way we in-habit the world. It is also an issue that not only demands a shift in our lived everydayness but in the way we understand and frame our relationship with the world. We will be required to recognize the depth of our interconnection and interdependency, and more importantly, we must explore new ways to work together, as a society, to respond to these issues.

Passive

The modes of subjectivity which Levinas gives us in the process of outlining the Subject's responsibility to and for the Other, are limiting. Whilst Levinas's relentless focus on the Other brings home the idea of the inexhaustible depth of our ethical responsibility, it is only one part of the story. Possibly the most important part, probably the most silenced part, but not the only part. In this sense Levinas's account of ethical responsibility is unbalanced, and does not re-present the story of a subject who is capable of undertaking positive action in response to the needs of others

in society. Levinas's focus on inescapable debt runs the risk of creating a subject overwhelmed by guilt and blame; a passive subject who understands its responsibility only in terms of the harm it necessarily inflicts; a subject unable to move towards the equally important question of how to act in ways that will alleviate violence done to the Other. Inescapable debt creates a disempowered, dis-abled, unresponsive subject.

Accused

According to Levinas, the Other is the master, the transcendental teacher who utters his commands from on high (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 1969:98). The face of the Other demands recognition of its being as a right to be that cannot be ignored or contested. It calls into "question the freedom of the subject" (Manning 1993:114). The face of the Other is an 'ethical command' – "Thou shall not kill" (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 1969:199). The subject comes into being, and time, according to Levinas, when it is addressed by the Other. I argue that the subject's first experience of being is of being accused of murder and being expected to 'apologize' for itself (Levinas *Collected Philosophical Papers* 1987:40). Also, the first example of being that the becoming-subject sees is enacted by the Other; the first words it hears are spoken by the Other. The face is not only a call to responsibility; It provides a model of being that is demanding and accusatory. I argue that the Levinasian subject, in its first relational encounter, learns about debt rather than gifting, and about taking rather than giving.

Dependent

I argue that another limit embedded in Levinas's ethical theory is the connection to society (Others) that the subject can undertake. This limit is evident in the dialogue between Levinas and Heidegger. Levinas is critical of Heidegger's privileging of the individual subject ('Dasein', for Heidegger), which he sees as a prioritizing of "freedom over ethics" (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 1969:45-47). Social relationships are something that Dasein *chooses*. Levinas's response to Heidegger is to focus on the pre-ontological relationship that the subject has with the other. For Levinas, the 'subject' is responsible for the Other before even becoming a subject ; the subject is comes into being through the Other. It owes the Other for its very being as a subject. Levinas gives us a subject that is *dependent* on the Other. He doesn't however address the *ontological* possibilities, and impossibilities, that result from this original relational mode, except to speak of the subject's desire to escape from what existence there-is before its relation with the Other.

The Heideggerean subject is too *independent* according to Levinas. Heidegger refers to other/s in society as 'The They' (Heidegger *Being and Time* 1962:223). The 'public' world represents a challenge for dasein. Dasein achieves authenticity only through being ones ownmost self, and according to Heidegger this can only be realized by overcoming ones 'They-self' (Heidegger *Being and Time* 1962:225), ones' social being. This social self is characterized by 'idle talk' (Heidegger *Being and Time* 1962:264) and inauthenticity for Heidegger. For Levinas, the subject is absolutely and inescapably relational. However, this relationship is one of debt and radical difference. There is no commensurability; there is respect but there is no mutuality, no intimacy between the subject and the Other/s. I argue that whilst Levinas is critical of Heidegger's subject's relation to society, the relationship Levinas presents the subject with is hardly better.

THE ETHICALLY RESPONSIBLE SUBJECT

Responsive rather than passive

Levinas's work on ethics sets the tone for our understanding of the ethically responsible subject, and places the Other (ie, ethics) at the heart of subjectivity (ie, ontology). However, as I have argued, there are limits to the modes of subjectivity (ontological possibilities) that this ethical pre-ontology enables. The Levinasian subject is undeniably and inescapably responsible; but it is not

responsive. It lacks the ontological capacity to enact this responsibility. The ethically responsible subject must be an agent for change; it must be able to translate its responsibility into possibilities for positive action; it must be *actional* rather than passive.

Response-able rather than accused

Not only must the ethically responsible subject be energized and essentially responsive, it must be able to respond. It must know how to respond. It must know what an ethical response is. It must have models of ethical response around which it can construct itself – models of how to give rather than demand; models of how to offer oneself to another as a gift rather than a repayment. The subject needs models of giving that transcend economies of obligation and even reciprocity. There must be ‘ways of being’ available to this emerging subject that exemplify unconditional giving; unreserved rather than simply inescapable responsibility. I argue that the ethically responsible subject needs to experience unconditional giving as well as demands and accusations, in order to be *response-able*. Part of this ability to give oneself to the other unconditionally involves being able to move beyond identities like ‘murderer’ which represent unresponsive and impossible to repay indebtedness.

Socially response-able rather than dependent

Finally we need an ethically responsible subject that is inter-actional as well as actional; that is actively engaged with the other in the construction of responsible possibilities. We need a subject that is capable of connecting with the other, for the other, in a way that does not do violence to the irreducible otherness of the other; a mutually reconstructive relationship without destructive totalizing tendencies; a relationship that supports collective action yet respects the infinite and irreducible. Levinas and Heidegger present a false binary when they propose either dependence, or independence; an inescapable dependency or the inauthentic subjectivity of the they-self. The ethically responsible subject must be grounded in a positive, socially interactive ontological condition – a condition that makes it possible for the subject and the other to take collaborative action.

We now have an image of the ethically responsible subject as a subject that is necessarily responsive, response-able and *socially response-able*. We therefore find ourselves face to face with the question of where to unearth these ontological possibilities in the pre-ontological narrative which Levinas begins to trace in his ethical theory.

‘AESTHETICS AS FIRST ETHICS’

The ethically responsible subject is an aesthetico-ethical subject

Levinas zealously distinguished his work on ethics from ontology. However, this positioning of ethics over, or before, ontology can be understood as a somewhat hyperbolic gesture towards the historically neglected status of the Other [ethics] (Manning 1993:111-112). Levinas is in fact, making a contribution to ontology – not a traditional qua totalizing ontology – but to our understanding of the pre-ontological becoming-subject; the prehistory from which being emerges. I prefer to understand Levinas’s ‘ethics of ethics’ as filling in some of the silences in traditional ontology; unspoken sections in the story of the subject. Rather than reduce or move beyond ontology, Levinas can be read as making ontology accountable to its ethical foundations, its hidden ethical premises. Levinas is writing the necessarily ethical preface to the story of being in the world.

I propose that the pre-ontological foundations for ethical responsiveness, response-ability and social response-ability can be found in the aesthetic dimensions of Levinas’s encounter with the face of the Other. I argue that the ethically responsible subject is better understood as an

aesthetico-ethical subject. In a step beyond Levinas's assertion that ethics is the "first philosophy" (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 1969:304), I argue that aesthetics is the first ethics. I will trace the contribution of the aesthetic to ethical responsibility by outlining a number of aesthetic themes that reshape the ethically responsible subject otherwise than Levinas.

THE AESTHETIC SUBJECT

Actional

Aesthetics is characterized by responsiveness. The history of aesthetics is woven around the idea of being energized, invigorated, excited and reanimated in response to aesthetic processes, products and appreciation. In "The Aesthetic Education of Man", Schiller laments not only the laziness and self-indulgence of men but also the extent to which man is generally too 'exhausted and enervated' to fight for justice (Schiller *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* 1794: Letter VIII). Schiller claims that the aesthetic has the capacity to stimulate, excite and intensify humanity's ability to respond (Schiller 1794:Letter XVII).

For Dewey, aesthetic experience represents the integrity, or wholeness of an Experience. During an Experience, the subject is more 'fully alive' and ready to take action. Dewey describes the subject of experience as 'taut with energy', 'active through his whole being'. Aesthetic experience is 'heightened vitality... It signifies active and alert commerce with the world' (Dewey *Art as Experience* 1934:18-19). Even Kant, who argued that aesthetic pleasure was generated by the free play of the faculties of understanding and imagination (Guyer 2005:170), made reference to the "animating of the subject's own activity" (Hepburn 2001:66) and 'quickenings' power of the aesthetic.

I argue that another important aspect of being responsive is being driven towards possibility. The aesthetic is not just active, it is purposeful. The aesthetic creates possibilities as well as the energy to drive towards them. Heidegger, as well as Dewey, gives us a sense of this ontological state of being-towardsness, as distinct from the passive condition of the Levinasian subject.

Life-affirming

The aesthetic is not only enlivening, it is life-affirming, which again contrasts poignantly with the Levinasian 'thou shall not kill'. Aesthetic practice "makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life", according to Jung's analysis of poetry (Hepburn 2001:71). Referring to the appreciation of 'great paintings', Francis Bacon commented on their ability to 'return him to life' (Bacon 1975:171). In her work "On Beauty and Being Just", Elaine Scarry describes the aesthetic as a 'greeting', a 'welcoming' (Scarry 1999:24-27). She explores the idea that aesthetic experience affirms not only the strength and presence of the Other's being in the world, but is also an affirmation of the subject's being in the world as it is constituted in relation with the Other. The aesthetic is a gift; the aesthetic celebrates the subject's existence (Scarry 1999:24-27). We can therefore create an image of the aesthetic as Life-giving.

In "The gift of the other", Lisa Guenther raises questions concerning Levinas and the maternal body. For Guenther, the Other is the Mother and the gift is the gift of birth, of life, existence, of the self's possibility (Guenther 2006:56). Guenther writes the Feminine Other and its language back into the primary ethical moment in Levinas's ethics – the face to face encounter (Guenther 206:58). I argue that the life-giving powers of the face of the other can also be framed aesthetically, as regenerative, rather than only reproductive. An aesthetic encounter with the face of the Other constitutes more than a demand or an accusation. It is a gift. It makes infinite responsibility possible by modeling infinite giving for the emerging subject.

Guenther argues that the economy of the gift, as distinct from the economies of exchange and direct reciprocity, brings with it an understanding that nothing is ‘mine’ to give (Guenther 2006:56-57). The gift doesn’t demand a return to the giver, but rather inspires the receiver to pass it on, to find and respond to the next person who is in need. The giver is located in a broader social network of responsibilities and interdependencies.

Interdependent

The model of subjectivity implicit in Dewey’s work on Experience resists the false binary of possible subjectivity that Levinas and Heidegger represent. Unlike Levinas’s dependent subject, who is indebted to the Other yet distanced from the Other by radical difference, and Heidegger’s independent subject who must move beyond others in order to actualize its possibilities, the Deweyan subject is interdependent and collaborative. Rather than a single mode of subjectivity – dependence or independence – Dewey argues that authenticity is a balanced movement between two modes of being – ‘doing and undergoing’ (Dewey 1934:23). The subject is not an independent subject who carves his or her will upon the world; nor is the subject a passive product of its environment. In a way, the subject is both. The Deweyan subject acts in the world and is acted upon by the world. The subject is fundamentally relational. It exists in a mutually reconstructive dialogue with the world.

Aesthetic experience is characterized by the ‘experience’ of doing and undergoing in harmonious proportions (Dewey 1934:ch3). Aesthetic experience describes the integrated wholeness of a particular experience in which one is fully alive in a distinctive rhythmic cycle of ‘doing and undergoing’, ‘sensation and reflection’, ‘acting and being acted upon’ (Dewey 1934:ch3).

According to Dewey, “esthetic experience is always more than esthetic”. It is about ‘being human’; about being ‘social’ (Dewey 1934:326). Aesthetic experience facilitates new “forms of relationship and participation” (Dewey 1934:333). Not only is an ‘Experience’ aesthetic in its proportional nature, the act of creating/art is the embodiment of this relational rhythm. “In short, art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience” (Dewey 1934:48). Dewey’s concept of artwork is essentially public. The artwork demands that it be made “perceptible, and hence [it] belongs to the common world” (Dewey 1934:51). Dewey goes on to remark that “sense organs are motor organs” (Dewey 1934:51) in order to claim that the aesthetic is not only necessarily characterized by driving energies, but specifically energies driven towards public possibilities. Dewey’s subject of aesthetic experience gives us the possibility of a subject who finds its ownmost possibilities for action in its interdependency and interaction with others; a subject that is socially response-able.

CONCLUSION

I have utilized a number of aesthetic theories and theorists to retell the story of the ethical subject. I have suggested that the emergence of an ethically responsible subject depends on its aesthetic encounter with the Other. Coming face to face with the Other, according to Levinas, generates the subject’s ethical responsibility. However, it is the aesthetic relationship between the emerging subject and the Other that makes the subject able to respond to the ethical demands of being with others in the world. The aesthetico-ethical subject locates its ownmost possibilities in a collaborative, dialogical self understanding.

As a teacher my challenge is now to investigate how this pre-ontological understanding of the aesthetico-ethical subject creates pedagogical possibilities. This will involve translating these ontological narratives into a theoretical framework that can be meaningfully applied by students of creative industries, when dealing with issues of autonomy, agency and authenticity. My recent classroom activities have been designed with the intention of locating students' ethical awareness and intentionality in their creative identities and practices. I have also just begun to explore how collaborative works of art do the work of bringing the students face to face with the Other and with each other in the mutually reconstructing face/ts of the artwork.

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