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**INFINITE RESPONSIBILITY: AN EXPRESSION OF  
SAINTLINESS**

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# **Infinite Responsibility: An expression of Saintliness**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I will focus my attention in the distinctions embedded in standard moral philosophy, especially in the philosophy of Kant between, on the one hand, duty and supererogation on the other hand, with the aim to contrast them with the Levinas's perspective, namely his notion of infinite responsibility.

My account of Levinas's philosophy will show that it challenges – breaking down – deeply entrenched distinctions in the dominant strands of moral philosophy, within which the theory of individual responsibility is rooted. Finally, I will argue that the notion of infinite responsibility to the Other could be viewed as an attempt to create an ethics, based on secular saintliness/holiness with individual and social consequences in our daily life.

**Key Words:** Levinas, Kant, infinite responsibility, ethics

## *Infinite Responsibility: An expression of Saintliness*

The concept of infinite responsibility is bound to be extremely problematic to any one immersed within the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition which defines the dominant conception of (individual) responsibility, both in morals and in law. The moral/political philosophers working within that framework have tended to ignore it. However, Richard Rorty, though not normally seen as a moral philosopher, does refer to it, but only to dismiss it in a few lines.<sup>1</sup> For this reason it is necessary to address certain criticisms, which could be directed against Levinas notion of infinite responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Supererogation and Kantian Ethics<sup>3</sup>

Entrenched in standard moral philosophy, is the distinction between duty on the one hand and supererogation on the other. While it is morally obligatory to perform the former, it is not morally obligatory, though morally laudable, to perform the other. Those who engage in it are honoured with the label of moral ‘heroes’ or ‘heroines’ who have sacrificed themselves for the good of others. They are the ‘good samaritans’, those who have gone beyond duty to help others while putting themselves out or exposing

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard, Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 96-97; it would be cited later on.

<sup>2</sup> This very limited attempt to defend Levinas must be taken in the spirit in which it is made, that is to say, totally independent of what Levinas himself might or might not have said, should he so wish to defend himself, of whether he might approve of this kind of exercise on his behalf. For a different kind of criticism than the sort raised here, see Michael Haar, “The Obsession of the Other: Ethics as Traumatization” , *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol.23 (6), (1997).

<sup>3</sup> In this discussion the term, “Kantian Ethics” is used to refer to that ethical perspective in modern Western moral thought which has been influenced by Kant’s ethical theory, and not necessarily uniquely to Kant’s ethical theory in the narrow and strict sense.

themselves to considerable or great risks of danger. They are considered in that sense to be ‘abnormal’, thereby creating the distinction between ‘normal’ moral agents who are in the majority and ‘abnormal’ ones who tend to be in the minority.

Increasingly over the last twenty years or so, in Britain, in any case, that number seems to be diminishing, judging by anecdotal accounts and news reports. For instance, a local free sheet in Manchester (*The Reporter*, 14 November 2002) carried a news item about an eighty-year old grandmother who was badly mugged by some teenaged girls while walking along a suburban street in the early evening; she appealed to a male passer-by for help who refused and walked away.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, history of the second half of the twentieth century provides some sublime examples of supererogation. For instance, some gentiles in Nazi-occupied Europe risked their very lives to hide and/or help Jewish people, whether neighbours or total strangers, to escape to safety.<sup>5</sup>

However, much as one might praise or be moved to tears by such noble efforts of samaritanism, and much as one might lament or be upset by the lack of the samaritan spirit in more mundane instances where the effort and risk incurred in helping someone

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<sup>4</sup> The decline of good samaritans in the UK could be put down to a variety of reasons: the feeling that it is often not safe to intervene, as one could be involved with violent behaviour, or that it would be futile to try to subdue some one potentially violent when other by-standers are not equally willing to join in to tackle the aggressor; owing to the change in ideological climate since 1979, more people than before tend to believe that rational egoism is the best policy to adopt – one turns away and leaves well alone whatever does not immediately affect one’s own interests; in a society where the spirit of litigation is rapidly being entrenched, one could even be sued for whatever damage one might unwittingly cause to another in one’s effort to help the victim. As a result, one finds today in Britain a greater reluctance to act as good samaritans even if the act involves little effort or risk, such as helping the mugged grandmother in question.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin, Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

in distress or danger is no more than some inconvenience to those on the scene, it remains the case that both forms of samaritanism, mundane or sublime, are regarded as forms of supererogation within the dominant (Western) tradition of moral philosophy. There is just no moral duty to carry them out.<sup>6</sup> Yet Levinas's emphasis on responsibility for the Other implies the abolition of the deep-seated distinction between duty on the one hand and supererogation on the other. That is why Levinas's conception of responsibility is said to be infinite responsibility, and also, therefore, considered as unintelligible to those who adhere to the dominant conception of responsibility in western moral thought, such as Rorty. On the standard understanding of morality, failure to carry out a moral duty is morally reprehensible and in legal contexts, justifies

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<sup>6</sup> However, if it is argued that these are not acts of supererogation but duties to others – that one is simply mistaken in holding that they are acts of supererogation – then the concept of supererogation runs the danger of being an empty category. What acts could possibly count as those of supererogation if not these? It would be incumbent on such critics to provide “genuine” instances of supererogation, to show how these differ significantly from the examples cited here, especially those which involve a very real risk of life to the “do-gooder”. In the absence of convincing arguments to make their point, one would be entitled to conclude that the concept of supererogation has been rendered null and void. Yet if these critics regard themselves as Kantian (as opposed to being utilitarian) in spirit and outlook, then they would have undermined their own standpoint. However, this criticism would not apply if the would-be critics are utilitarians, as the utilitarian tradition does not need to recognise the distinction between duty on the one hand and supererogation on the other – for them, whether one has a duty in any one instance depends entirely on good consequences outweighing bad ones overall. In the case of saving Jews from Nazi persecution, if one were to do a utilitarian calculation, it would probably turn out in some instances that overall, bad rather than good consequences would ensue; in the majority of instances, it would be very difficult even to envisage what the consequences could be given the extreme uncertainties surrounding the dilemma; and probably in a few cases, it might be possible to say definitively that good consequences would prevail.

the infliction of an appropriate penalty;<sup>7</sup> failure to carry out a supererogatory act, while still attracting some mild reprobation especially in instances where only inconvenience would be incurred in discharging such an act, is not regarded to be morally reprehensible in the way that failure to carry out a moral duty attracts moral/legal disapproval. On the other hand, to engage in such an act (whether minor or major) earns the agent moral praise and honour, as already mentioned. The Levinasian conception of responsibility forces one to look at this asymmetry anew.

From his perspective as interpreted here, it would be incoherent to draw a boundary between those acts which constitutes duties to others and those which are less than duties to others when in either instance, one's effort could end with the same result, namely, preventing harm to another. The aim of not laying a trap in the dark for another is precisely the same as the aim of getting medical help to another seriously injured by falling into such a trap; yet (a) why should the former constitute a duty and the latter a mere supererogation? (b) why suffer moral unease when there is failure to help another in distress, unless the failure to do so constitutes an act which hurts or injures another?

To raise questions like the above is to draw attention to the 'thinness' of the moral universe purveyed by the dominant account of responsibility. 'Thinness' here refers to the absolute minimum amount of moral engagement between human beings, which is necessary for society to cohere and to exist. To draw the boundary between self and others in this way would ensure minimal overlap and, hence, the maximal space

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<sup>7</sup> Note that in law (English law, at least), the general public has no legal obligation to assist another who is in distress. For example, in a swimming pool, one is not legally obliged to save someone who is drowning; however, the poolside supervisor/monitor does have a legal duty to save the drowning person, and should he fail to do so, that act of omission would amount to criminal negligence and render him liable to be charged with criminal manslaughter.

for the self to operate and to 'do its own thing', protected, as much as possible, from being tangled with the lives of others.

It may be fair to say that modern Western ethical thought has focused, perhaps unfairly so to Kant's own complex thoughts, on the so-called notion of perfect duties to others.<sup>8</sup> We shall see why in a moment. To greatly simplify matters, Kant may be said to use two sets of distinction – perfect/imperfect duties on the one hand and duties to self/to others on the other – thereby creating four categories of duties: perfect duty to self (such as the duty not to commit suicide), imperfect duty to self (duty to develop and realise one's own potential), perfect duties to others (duties not to kill, maim or damage others, bodily and economically), imperfect duties to others (duty to help others to thrive and flourish).<sup>9</sup> Kant's efforts to clarify the Categorical Imperative, embedded in his philosophy of freedom through its various formulations, is complicated, not easy to set out briefly and is not without problems.<sup>10</sup> In moral deliberation, one must adopt the standpoint of a rational agent, and in so doing, arrive at an imperative which in turn applies universally to all rational beings.

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<sup>8</sup> This point is an important one to emphasise here. First of all, this very brief discussion of Kant's moral philosophy in terms of the Categorical Imperative and of duties is not meant to be, as it necessarily cannot be, thorough, systematic or exhaustive.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent thorough discussion of the detailed complexities of Kant's moral philosophy, see Roger, J. Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and for an anthology of essays on the subject, see Ruth Chadwick, (ed), *Kant's Moral and Political Philosophy – Immanuel Kant: Critical Assessments*, (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> See Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* for a shorter account, see Roger, Scruton, *Kant*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952) pp 58-77; for a more critical account, see Ralph, C.S. Walker, *Kant: The Arguments of the Philosophers*, (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 147-64.

In other words, reason dictates – according to the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative – that in deciding to act to carry out an end, the agent must act only on that maxim which when universalised would not involve the agent in a contradiction, that is, a maxim which one can will as a universal law – “*Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a **universal law of nature.***”<sup>11</sup> Although the maxim is formal, yet far from being devoid of practical implications and content, it is commonly understood to yield very concrete injunctions, such as one has a duty not to break promises. Contradiction is involved as follows:

- (a) To be a moral law, the maxim which forbids promise-breaking, must be universally binding.
- (b) Should I wish to act against this moral law, such as to break a promise whenever it is to my advantage to do so, I would be making an exception of myself to the law.
- (c) Yet, in granting this exception to myself, I must grant it to all others, as every moral agent, including myself, is a rational agent,
- (d) But if every rational agent were to act as I do, that is, to make an exception of him/herself to the moral law, the institution of promise breaking will be undermined or abolished.
- (e) Hence, I cannot universalise the maxim of my action – keep promises if and only if my own interests are advanced – without contradiction.
- (f) And hence, the maxim – always keep promises – is universally binding, and therefore a moral law.

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<sup>11</sup> I, Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 4:421- 31.



However, while it is relatively easy to justify this example of perfect duties to others under the first formulation, it does not seem to work quite so readily in the case of Kant's prohibition of suicide – perfect duty to self – as an instantiation of it. No contradiction appears to be involved in the same way as a contradiction is shown to be involved in the maxim about promise breaking, as set out in the note earlier. Suppose I will that I and every rational agent such as myself commit suicide. What would happen is that the whole of humanity would probably be wiped out (save those who do not qualify to be rational agents, such as the infantile and the very senile in mind). Absurd as the implication of such a universal maxim might be, no contradiction has been committed in proposing it. Absurdity may be a departure from rationality in some other sense of the term but it does not amount to a contradiction in this context. Furthermore, Kant has not given any other characterisation of the concept of rationality, save relying on its strongest form, namely, the principle of non-contradiction. So Kant has not demonstrated that prohibition against suicide is a moral law, and therefore, that suicide is invariably morally wrong. In any case, rational beings are more likely to propose a more nuanced maxim, such as: I will that I and rational agents like myself who are incurably/terminally ill and in extreme pain commit suicide or be assisted to do so. Kant might claim that there is a contradiction involved here, namely, that one would be committing oneself to the pursuit of happiness and at the same time to steps, which would render its further pursuit impossible. But such an attempt does not sound very convincing – happiness, after all, might well be found under these circumstances in what might be called a 'good death', a death of which the rational agent is in full control, in full exercise of his/her autonomy. Such a maxim does not sanction suicide 'tout court' but suicide under certain specific circumstances only. However, Kant's aim is to prohibit suicide in all forms and not to distinguish that class which we call euthanasia –

one could say that Kant's formal use of rationality (*via* the principle of non-contradiction) is not sufficient here to generate a substantive norm of conduct.

Similarly, Kant's treatment of imperfect duty to self suffers from the same weakness. The maxim: "Let everyone neglect his talents" is perfectly universal. It might not be rational to will it as a moral law but not in the sense that as a universal maxim, it embodies outright contradictions. Furthermore, to say that one cannot (rationally) will to neglect one's talents since as a rational being one necessarily will that all one's power's be developed is unconvincing – the utterance amounts to a tautology unless further content were given to what is meant by 'rational being', 'necessarily will'.

However, Kant's category of imperfect duty to others is more amenable to the treatment he has in mind. The maxim: "Let no one ever help anyone else" is also universal. The contradiction amounts to this:

- (a) All rational agents, myself included, necessarily will our own individual happiness.
- (b) All rational agents, myself included, also necessarily will the means to achieve our respective ends.
- (c) All rational agents, myself included, sometimes require the help of others and, thereby, necessarily will their help on such occasions.
- (d) "Let no one ever help anyone else" is, therefore, incompatible with the conjunction: (a), (b) and (c).

This could be one reason why the category of perfect duties to others (which could, by and large, be translated into negative duties of the kind commonly formulated in terms of "thou shall not kill", "thou shall not steal", "thou shall not lie or break promises" etc.) receives more attention than the other three categories, in spite of the fact that the category of imperfect duties to others is more akin to the logic of perfect

duties to others (as shown in the preceding note) than the remaining two categories of duties to self.<sup>12</sup>

Kant's notion of rationality, autonomy and freedom implies that every rational agent is "an end in himself", according to his second formulation – "*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.*"<sup>13</sup> In other words, one must treat all rational agents never simply as means to one's own ends, but as ends in themselves.

As the first formulation has shown, the moral agent must regard the moral law as something universally legislated and binding; this point is reinforced in the third formulation, namely, that the will of every rational agent is "a universally legislative will" involving a "kingdom of ends" to which every agent subscribes in acting autonomously. It is sometimes formulated as follows: "Act as if you were through your maxims a legislating member of a Kingdom of Ends"<sup>14</sup> the original passage in Kant reads: "The concept of every rational being as one who must regard himself as giving universal law through all the maxims of his will, so as to appraise himself and his actions from this point of view, leads to a very fruitful concept dependent upon it, namely that *of a kingdom of ends.*"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> That is why Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative is said to provide the philosophical basis for the Golden Rule – do unto others what you would wish others to do unto you. See Sir David Ross, *Kant's Ethical Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) pp. 44-45; Scruton, *Kant*, p. 70. For an alternative interpretation, see Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory*, p. 204.

<sup>13</sup> I, Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 1997, 4:429,38.

<sup>14</sup> Walker 1987, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Kant 1997, 4:433, 41.

As I have just mentioned, the first formulation seems to fit best the category of perfect duties to others. The second formulation underpins Kant's notion of 'persons' as opposed to 'things' – while the latter is not rational, autonomous and free, the former is category is eminently so. Kant writes:

Beings the existence of which rests not on our will but on nature, if they are beings without reason, still have only a relative worth, as a means, and are therefore called *things*, whereas rational beings are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself, that is, as something that may not be used merely as a means, and hence so far limits all choice (and is an object of respect).<sup>16</sup>

This in turn serves to lay the foundation of the concept of right. Persons who come under the aegis of the Categorical Imperative are those beings who have rights to whom we owe duties. Respect for persons and rights go hand in hand, leading once again to an implied emphasis on the category of perfect duties to others.

In this light, the Kantian influence in shaping modern Western moral thought seems to have been confined to an emphasis on rights and respect as well as on the notion of perfect duties to others. This in turn may have led to a de-emphasis on benevolence, which may have been reinforced by Kant's privileging reason over passion. Benevolence is a sentiment or inclination, which may or may not reside in any one person on any one occasion. To act out of benevolence appears to be a chancy affair, depending on mood and circumstance. In any case, mere inclination or passion has no particular moral worth; moral worth lies in the ability of the rational human agent to resist inclination to which he/she is also prey – “It is a very beautiful thing to do good to men from love to them and from sympathetic goodwill, or to be just from

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<sup>16</sup> Kant 1997, 4:428, 37.

love of order, but this is not the true moral maxim.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the desire to live is mere instinct; however, the desire to continue to live in spite of all the odds, out of duty, not to commit suicide, constitutes moral worth.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, while Kant emphasises that one may not refuse to help others in need in so far as one can do so, that one may not in general be indifferent to the happiness of others, nevertheless, he is of the opinion that these moral duties need have no juridical counterparts.<sup>19</sup> In other words, he seems to imply that while they are morally laudable and even obligatory, and, indeed, that one should actively cultivate “love” of others – “moral love” in the sense that one ought to feel genuinely benevolent to others irrespective of whether one likes them or cares for them personally – the relevant realm of their operation is inter-personal conduct between individuals, and not in the public domain, either civic/national and international.<sup>20</sup> However, as we shall see a little later, western societies of late on the whole have opted to recognise in law certain minimum obligations to secure the welfare of all its citizens; however, for societies/governments to recognise that similar obligations to others in need outside their national boundaries is more difficult to secure.

## 2. Supererogation and Common Sense Morality

However, at this point of the argument, I need to introduce a new element to complicate the picture so far outlined, which might further explain why it appears difficult for

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<sup>17</sup> I, Kant *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997b), 249.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Scruton, *Kant*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> Following Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Theory*, p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> On Kant's emphasis on moral love, see Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Theory* pp. 205-6. This then means at best private charity.

societies to recognise obligations to those in need outside their national boundaries. The major (philosophical) normative systems which have informed and defined modern Western moral thought, namely, the Kantian, the liberal and (to some extent also) the utilitarian traditions, all of which in principle are universalising ethics excluded certain groups and certain kinds of actions. For the first, the Categorical Imperative applies to all those human beings who count as persons; for the second, the liberal principle is applicable to all normal adult human beings whose rational faculty could be assumed to be properly developed; for the third, the principle of utility covers all those beings (theoretically including non-human ones, but in practice in the main applied to humans only) who can suffer pain. However, in reality, historically and in political terms, their universalising aspect has not always been applied to those who may qualify in philosophical terms for consideration under their respective rubrics; given the historical and cultural differences between groups and societies, those who have been (or are) excluded have been (or are) perceived to be different from those included.

It appears that at the same time, in practice, these major traditions, within which the notion of individual responsibility is philosophically embedded, have also been checked by another current in modern Western society, which subscribes not so much to a universalising approach to ethics, as to a much older conception of duties to others, which may be called 'concentric'.<sup>21</sup> By this is meant, that duties to one's family

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<sup>21</sup> The combination of the historically and culturally determined limitations in the application of the major universalising ethics may be seen in the following examples. For example, Kantian ethics took a rather long time indeed in modern Western societies to break through the concentric circle of males as far as voting was concerned, although it is clear that normal adult women do qualify to be persons in the Kantian sense of the term. Mill withheld the application of his liberal principle from the working classes of his day on the grounds that their rational faculty was under-developed owing to their lack of education. And as far as the utilitarian tradition is concerned, Bentham, to his credit did advocate the emancipation

constitute the innermost circle, and therefore, the most compelling; then to people who live within the national jurisdiction; then to so-called 'kith and kin' in the diaspora. In the past, the family usually included three generations, children, parents and grand parents. However, to day, the pattern has changed in the advanced industrial countries in the West and even elsewhere. In the past, duties to elderly parents were considered quite as compelling as duties to children and to husband/wives. Today, duties to the former are construed so minimally as to be virtually non-existent; a good many may still have the residual feeling that they should get in touch a few times a year with their elderly parents or grand parents, such as on birthdays and at Christmas. The care of the elderly increasingly is no longer the responsibility of the immediate family but of institutions, whether paid for by the state or by the individual. The family increasingly is construed as the nuclear family – not only has the notion shrunk in scope and size but also has come, in some cases, to be regarded as a temporal thing which endures only until the children obtain the age of majority.<sup>22</sup> On the hand, recent developments on the environmental front have forced society and some theorists to consider the problem of

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of slaves, but subject to orderly utilitarian requirements – that is to say, free your slaves and as many of them at any one time as was compatible with security, order, and indeed, economic contingencies. Although the formal act of emancipation occurred in the USA nearly two centuries ago, it remains true that even to this day, by and large, African Americans are still at a disadvantage in numerous spheres of life compared to their compatriots, in general, of European descent.

<sup>22</sup> One in three marriages in the UK, today, ends in divorce or separation. Some divorced parents even take the view that their duties to their offspring are at best confined to financial support only. However, the rate of re-marriage following divorce is also high. In this sense, a new kind of extended family has taken the place of the old; but the duties to step children are not in general construed to be as compelling as duties to one's own offspring.

duties to posterity and to debate the issue whether present generations owe obligations to future generations.<sup>23</sup>

As already mentioned, people, on the whole, recognise, one's moral and legal (minimum) obligations to others, especially fellow citizens, who live within the national jurisdiction, although many are none too keen to see too much of their taxes diverted to support services which are universally open to all or to those in need. However, with regard to people, outside one's national boundaries, no matter how needy, there is even less moral enthusiasm in general to divert taxes to help support them. Some governments may have set the laudable goal of devoting 1% - 2% of their GNP to foreign aid, but very few ever reach it. The UN is trying again; its Millennium Development Goals was adopted by the General Assembly in September 2000.<sup>24</sup> This attitude has been (or is) regarded as normal because traditionally all societies make a distinction between kith and kin on the one hand and total strangers on the other.<sup>25</sup> To

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<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Avner, De-Shalit, *Why Posterity Matters: Environment Policies and Future Generations*(London: Routledge, 1992).

The minimum time span is generally agreed to be a hundred years. It is difficult today to work out how many generations would occur over a period of a hundred years, as the pattern of child-bearing has altered so dramatically of late, especially now with medically-assisted reproduction of one kind or another in place.

<sup>24</sup> Larry Elliott, "A Bond with the Poor of the World", *The Guardian*, (16 December, 2002, 21). See UN's Millennium Development Goals (2000). See also the Pre-Budget Report of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, UK (2002). Gordon Brown has proposed to the G7 countries, the IMF and the World Bank, in the name of global justice, to double international aid to \$100 billion dollars between 2002 and 2015 in order to meet the UN's millennium development goals. For an account of the mechanisms which Brown hopes to rely on to achieve the goal he has set out.

<sup>25</sup> In some tribal societies in the past, not only was there no duty to help strangers in distress, there is, on the contrary, a positive duty to harm them, as strangers were usually the bearers of ill-will and aggression.



the former in distant lands, one owes duties to help under certain circumstances, but to the latter, who do not share one's language/culture/history, one owes no such things. However, today, when the television brings instant images of want and suffering into one's living room, when man-made changes in climatic and other conditions are global in character, when economic relations between nations are increasingly drawn into a complicated world-wide network under the aegis of globalisation, etc., a change in attitude is being set in motion by certain individuals, NGOs, and even some governments to expand the notion of duties to others to include people in need who live outside one's national jurisdiction and who may not share one's language/culture/history.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, in today's culture, it remains on the whole to be the case that while one may be said to have some moral obligations to the needy who live in one's jurisdiction, who are one's kith and kin, who share one's history, language and culture, etc., one has no such duties to those who are outside these boundaries. At best it would

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<sup>26</sup> Sarah, Boseley, "Cost-price Drugs Plan for Poor Countries", *The Guardian*, (28 December, 2002). The UK government in November 2002 announced a plan for a two-tier system for drug pricing which would make essential drugs available to the poor countries at cost price while the developed countries continue to pay for them at the rate charged by pharmaceutical companies. However, Clare Short's – Minister for International Development – initiative was/is expected to run into opposition from the US government and its pharmaceutical lobby. And it has; in the month following, Dick Cheney, the US vice-president, at the WTO talks in Geneva ruled out a deal which would have allowed a full range of life-saving drugs to be imported into Africa, Asia and Latin America at cut-price costs. Acting at the behest of the drug companies, he wants to impose the narrowest possible interpretation of the Doha Declaration, and to confine price reduction only to drugs dealing with HIV/Aids, malaria, TB and a few other diseases unique to Africa but for which the drug companies do little or no research – see Elliott, "A Bond with the Poor of the World" and Charlotte, Denny, "Bush Blocks Deal Allowing Cheap Drugs for the World's poor" *The Guardian*,(19 February, 2003) p.25.

be laudable to help such others, but that would be an act of supererogation and not duty. Given this orientation, it is convenient, on the whole, for affluent Western societies to leave the job of satisfying the needs of the poor and the sick living in the world's less developed economies to those who desire to perform acts of supererogation by supporting international non-governmental organisations such as Oxfam and Médecins sans Frontières

I have now briefly unpicked some of the strands which make up the moral consciousness and conscience in general in today's Western societies, traced some of them back to what may be called a sub-conscious selective borrowing, probably, of certain aspects of Kant's moral philosophy, reinforced by certain elements in so-called common sense morality, which may be said to make it easy for theorists to dismiss out of hand Levinas's notion of infinite responsibility for others. His notion is infinite for precisely the reasons already set out, that is to say, he rejects the distinction between family/kith and kin on the one hand and strangers on the other, between so-called perfect duties on the one hand and imperfect duties on the other, between (as Kant would understand it) reason on the one hand and inclination/passion on the other, between duty on the one hand and supererogation on the other, and thus he also rejects the asymmetry between moral praise for acts of supererogation on the one hand while withholding moral condemnation for failure to carry out such acts on the other. For Levinas, it appears that each and every one has one supreme duty, and that is, always to be responsible for others, to act out of benevolence to others. As we have seen, ethics as first philosophy for Levinas tolerates no exclusion – our moral duties are not confined to certain groups and to certain kinds of action only.

### 3. Saintliness/Holiness or Moral Perfection: Is It So Absurd?

In the following exchange, Levinas raises the notion of saintliness.

Question: The self, as the ethical subject, is responsible for everything and everyone; one's responsibility is infinite. Is not this situation non-viable for the subject itself as well as for the other as I risk to terrorise it by my ethical will? Is there not then an ethical impotence in the will to do good?

Levinas: I do not know if the situation is non-viable. It is not what one would call agreeable, certainly, it may not be pleasant, but it is the good. What is very important – I am able to support that without being myself a saint, nor do I pass myself off as a saint – it is the ability to say that the notion of being truly human, in the European sense of the term, comes from the Greeks and the Bible, and which understands saintliness as the ultimate value, as the unquestioned value. Sure, it is very difficult to preach that; it does not go down well to preach it and to do so may well incur the scorn of society as presently evolved.<sup>27</sup>

Supererogation may be said to be an aspect of 'saintliness'. As shown earlier, while acts of supererogation/saintliness may be laudable, all the same, these notions are not part and parcel of morality or moral thinking as commonly practised or understood in modern Western societies. They do not constitute moral duties as such. To aspire to such sublime moral heights is perfectly laudable from the point of view of cultivating moral virtue or perfection in one's character; but it implies that not all moral agents are expected to follow such a path. It is analogous to the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church, at least in the past, to the religious vocation. While exhorting its young to enter

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<sup>27</sup> Levinas *Totality and Infinity – An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 239. My own translation.

the religious life, to embrace the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, nevertheless, the Church is well aware that not every one is capable of being called or of following such a calling – those, who do, are honoured, but those, who do not, are neither blamed nor censured.

Saintliness or holiness is, therefore, a private calling for the few. Furthermore, to try to practise it outside the domain of the personal and the individual is a sign of obtuseness and inaptitude, which would produce more bad than good – after all, the way to hell is paved with good intentions. Such a spirit is behind the brisk dismissal by Rorty of Levinas:

The notion of ‘infinite responsibility’ formulated by Emmanuel Levinas and sometimes deployed by Derrida ... may be useful to some of us in an individual quest 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.<sup>28</sup>

But is saintliness/supererogation as moral perfection such a useless or unhelpful notion in public political life?

To make sense of the notion of saintliness or moral perfection, one should simply regard it as an ideal towards which we ought to aspire and to execute in practice as much as it is possible in both the personal and the public domains. (However, for the purpose in hand, only the public domain will be looked at.) Such an enterprise is neither inherently absurd nor unsound in practice. In political philosophy proper, similar disdain is expressed about utopias and the idea of utopianism itself, although it does not

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<sup>28</sup> Rorty *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 96-97.

prevent a massive literature on the subject from building up over the centuries by theorists all over the world.<sup>29</sup> It is true that utopias when put into practice have in general failed, and in some cases become distinctly dystopian in character. But from this, one cannot simplistically infer that the very attempt to formulate it is either unintelligible or has no worth. The idea of utopia is analogous to the notion of truth in epistemology. Many epistemologists, too, have argued that the notion of truth is either incoherent and/or unachievable; however, that has not prevented other philosophers as well as scientists (of the natural world) from hanging on to some version of it, arguing that it is nevertheless indispensable in any attempt to give an account of the world around us. One very influential philosopher of science, Karl Popper, has talked about verisimilitude or approximation to truth as an indispensable epistemological goal in scientific theorising – even if we would never know the whole truth or know that we know the (whole) truth, nevertheless, it makes sense for us to strive to get at the truth and to say that one theory is closer to the truth than other, and in this way arrive at least at some truths, though necessarily partial.<sup>30</sup>

In the same way, one must have ideals, some of which are captured in utopian thought, to inform our social and political visions, or public life would be very impoverished indeed. Utopian ideals play the important role of providing a focus for a

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<sup>29</sup> Just to cite one limited example of the volume of work in this genre which is confined to one country alone in the course of only a hundred and fifty years of its history, see Gregory, Claeys, (ed), *Modern British Utopias, 1700-1850*, (London: Pickering, 1987) 8 vols. For recent critical assessments, see Krishan, Kumar, *Utopianism*; Aurel, Kolnai, *The Utopian Mind and Other Papers: A critical Study in Moral and Political Philosophy*, (London: Athlone Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> K, Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, (London:Routledge, 1969). See also T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). Kuhn, whether rightly or wrongly, is often construed as undermining the notion of truth in science in that book which first appeared in 1962.

critique of extant society. In their absence, no truly radical criticism and departure from the 'status quo' would be feasible. Utopias in concrete may be transient or be corrupted in practice, yet they appear to have the habit of leaving residues behind, with a kind of underground life, slowly permeating through the public consciousness eventually to make itself felt, though not in the form envisaged by the utopian author himself. Take Charles Fourier (1772-1837) and his utopian vision as an example.<sup>31</sup> Those set up in America in his name did not last long, it is true, yet his idea of sexual emancipation for both men and women from what he saw as the unhealthy repression of sexuality on the part of Christianity – a crucial element of his social/political philosophy – finally only became accepted and mainstream in the 1960s.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, many so-called utopian ideas are only utopian because they are well ahead of their time, so much so that their contemporaries often, if not invariably, regarded their originators to be insane, a fate which Fourier suffered. In other words, in many instances, an ideal written off as utopian is simply one which has been enunciated before its time, and whose unwitting role seems then to be that of preparing the ground for its later reception. What appeared at first to be highly idealistic, in the sense of being impractical and unlikely to have mass appeal, becomes ultimately accepted by society in general and even commonplace. Like truth or approximation to it which acts as epistemological guide to the eventual emergence of theories which are more true than false, analogously, society informed by certain utopian ideals may be able to inch towards them, perhaps never fully achieving, though often successful eventually in partially instantiating them.

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<sup>31</sup> Charles, Fourier, *Oeuvres Complètes de C. Fourier*, (Paris: Librairie Sociétaire, 1841).

<sup>32</sup> This, however, is not to say that the existence of the utopian idea in itself is the only necessary and sufficient condition for its eventual (partial) instantiation. For example, two other conditions in the 1960s may also be mentioned regarding the change in attitude to sexual behaviour: the existence of effective contraception and the improvement in the economic situation of women.

It is probably in a similar fashion that Levinas himself understands his notion of infinite responsibility for the Other. In an interview in 1988, he was reported to say:

That is the great separation that there is between the way the world functions concretely and the ideal of saintliness of which I am speaking. And I maintain that this ideal of saintliness is presupposed in all our value judgements. ... There is a utopian moment in what I say; it is the recognition of something which cannot be realized but which, ultimately, guides all moral action. ... There is no moral life without utopianism – utopianism in this exact sense that saintliness is goodness.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the moment for the utopian ideal of saintliness or moral perfection in the form of Levinas's notion of infinite responsibility to bear some fruit is about to arrive in the public domain, both nationally and internationally.

The transition to practical implementation could perhaps even be eased by a proposal to pare down the notion a little without undermining its essence. To see how this could be done, let us take a look at utilitarianism and a particular criticism often raised against it. Its over-arching value is to maximise pleasure/happiness on the one hand and to minimise pain on the other – the former may be referred to as positive and the latter as negative utilitarianism.<sup>34</sup> The positive version is said to be unworkable for the simple reason that the notion of happiness or pleasure is considered to be slippery. After all, one person's pleasure is another person's poison; furthermore, one person may derive intense but another only mild pleasure from the same activity. Worse, the pursuit of happiness is elusive – upon achieving it, it seems to evaporate. Hence the

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<sup>33</sup> E. Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality: In an interview with Emmanuel Levinas", Robert Bernasconi and D. Wood (eds), *The Provocation of Levinas*, (New York: Routledge, 1988), 177-78.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Karl, Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, (London: Routledge, 1957), pp. 158, 284 (note 2).

goal of maximising pleasure in society is inoperable.<sup>35</sup> The negative version, however, does not suffer from these criticisms.<sup>36</sup> Although we may have no idea about what makes people happy, we have a much clearer idea as to what makes people miserable – to suffer from hunger, cold, great heat or thirst, to have no roof over the head, to endure (severe and sustained) pain from illness and disease, etc.<sup>37</sup> To minimise pain/suffering constitutes a coherent social vision, sufficient to generate a consensus as guide to policy-making in the public domain. If policy A adversely affects  $x$  number of people, yielding  $n$  units of pain, while policy B affects  $10x$  adversely, yielding  $10n$  units of pain, then choose policy A over B.

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<sup>35</sup> One standard retort is to say that these criticisms are beside the point. One can ignore them by simply asking those who would be affected by a particular policy (over an alternative) how much pleasure (along a scale) each would derive, and add up all the units of pleasure to determine which is the better policy to pursue. However, this is not the place to delve into this particular set of problems.

<sup>36</sup> It does seem to invite the criticism that it entails the conclusion that one ought to kill everyone painlessly. However, this *reductio ad absurdum* would not apply to the negative version proposed here of Levinas's notion of infinite responsibility for the Other.

<sup>37</sup> Such deprivations are part of what is meant by poverty in the absolute sense of the term. However, it has been argued that poverty is never absolute, always relative – the former makes no sense. For instance, if poverty were to be understood in absolute terms only, one might have to conclude that no body (or very few people) in the advanced industrial economies today are poor, as the welfare safety net on the whole succeeds in preventing the unfortunate from falling into really dire straits. But all the same, such people constitute the socially excluded, with no money to buy and run a car, to buy expensive presents for their children, etc.; they are said to suffer from relative poverty. It is not part of the remit of this paper to deny that the notion of relative poverty has application. However, it does reject the further thesis that the notion of absolute poverty is either unintelligible or does not exist in spite of the incontestable fact that absolute poverty in the world does exist – millions of poor people die because they cannot afford to buy the food to keep alive, of diseases induced by the lack of safe drinking water and/or adequate nutrition as well as by the lack of hygiene and/or proper medication.



Analogously, Levinas's notion of responsibility for others may be a given a negative interpretation. While we definitely have a duty to others (irrespective of kith/kin, nationhood, race/culture/history), nevertheless, we may not have responsibility for their happiness, as we do not know what makes people happy (borrowing, for the moment, the language of utilitarianism). But all the same we do have a duty to reduce their poverty, suffering, their misery, as we know, by and large, what constitutes their unhappiness and their pain.<sup>38</sup> In this way, although one may still have infinite responsibility for others (in the sense that none shall be excluded), the nature of the duty is somewhat more circumscribed, and therefore, more do-able. When this sense of being do-able is added to the other sense of being affordable in economic/financial terms, then there should be no inherent obstacle, both intellectual and practical, to discharging that responsibility to others.

Levinas's emphasis on the suffering of others lends weight to this suggested defence. As we have seen, he is against social exclusion, he talks about the neediness of others, the plight of the widow, the orphan, the weak, the sick, all demanding a response from us.

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<sup>38</sup> In environmental philosophy, the duty to posterity is understood in these terms. Regarding future peoples, we may not know what makes them happy, but we certainly know what would make them miserable – lack of clean air, clean water, unpolluted soil, to name just a few of the conditions the absence of which would render human life, if not totally impossible, at least unbearable – see Annette Baier, “The Rights of Past and Future Persons”, Ernest Partridge (ed), *Responsibilities to Future Generations*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1981).

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#### 4. Conclusion

I have identified and distinguished several senses of Levinas's notion of infinite responsibility. Responsibility is infinite because:

1. it recognises no distinction between duty on the one hand and supererogation on the other;
2. it does not recognise the distinction between perfect duties on the one hand and imperfect duties to others;
3. it is inclusive, not exclusive, as it fails to recognise the distinction between family, kith/kin on the one hand and strangers on the other, between insiders (those who share the same history, culture, language, ethnicity) on the one hand and outsiders who do not. It urges one to recognise the humanity in the Other, in all others, not only in some, namely, those who are regarded as 'persons' in the philosophical sense or kith and kin in the sociological sense. One should be the good samaritan and not pass by, indifferent to the life or death, pain and suffering of fellow humans;<sup>39</sup>
4. one can distinguish between the positive and the negative senses of responsibility for others. While one concedes that it does not need to be understood in the former sense of doing whatever one can to render them "happy", one can, nevertheless, meaningfully discharge that duty in the

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<sup>39</sup> On one of the few occasions when Levinas refers to the Holocaust, he remarked: "The absence of concern for the other in Heidegger and his personal political adventure are linked". E. Levinas, *Les Imprévus de L'Histoire*, ( Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1992).

reduced negative sense of doing what one can to relieve others of suffering and poverty, there being a clear consensus as to what constitutes misery.

As such, Levinas's notion may be said to be radical as it seems to challenge well-entrenched presuppositions especially in the Kantian tradition of Western moral thought, as well as of so-called common sense morality, which in turn enables one to understand why his notion is ignored in general or dismissed out of hand by those like Rorty, who care to comment on it, as either inherently absurd and/or impractical.

Furthermore, and more importantly, I have attempted to argue that Levinas philosophy can be construed as an attempt to construct a new moral paradigm which, contrary to the tradition of modern Western philosophy, follows from his view of ethics as first philosophy, based on secular saintliness/holiness, which is a radical departure from the dominant strands of moral philosophy, whether Kantian, liberal, or utilitarian.

However, Levinas's radical challenge inevitably invites the charge of utopianism, and utopianism itself in turn is considered to be inherently absurd, and impractical. But is it? Levinas's brand may just be blazing the moral trail in the twenty first century.