

***Compassion for Things I'll Never Know:  
The Philosophical Basis of Transpersonal Responsibility***

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***Introduction***

As a brief aside, to introduce this presentation, I wanted to share that the inspiration for this paper actually came to me while reading a quote about existential-phenomenology while listening to David Byrne's album *Everything That Happens Will Happen Today*. Always a good combination in my opinion. The quote I came across was in Stewart & Mickunas's (1990) *Exploring Phenomenology* in which they note, "For one discovers his own authentic humanity only by recognizing the humanity of others. Authentically existing individuals who recognize each other's humanity constitute a community" (p. 67). I immediately thought of the notion of transpersonal responsibility, an idea I have been writing about for the past few years, and the idea for this paper was born.

As I mentioned, I was also listening to David Byrne, and there is a line in one of his songs that I've always loved: "Connected to every living soul/Compassion for things I'll never know." It got me thinking about how I could connect the Buberian notion of I-Thou relationships to having a transpersonal I-Thou stance of reverence towards humanity and the world at large. Roughly stated, I view authenticity in relationships as an outgrowth of freedom/responsibility to others and a fundamental respect of their humanity, or honoring of their existence, if you will. Together, living authentically, we form a community. The notion of community thus ultimately underlies the notion of transpersonal responsibility, which is community on a grand scale or having "compassion for things I'll never know."

In this paper I will draw together Buber's philosophical anthropology and the ethics of responsibility posited by Levinas in an exploration of the interrelated concepts of authenticity, community, and responsibility. Elsewhere (Adame & Leitner, 2010) I have written about the notion of transpersonal responsibility, which may be defined as a calling to attend to the needs of the human and non-human (e.g., causes of environmentalism) world at large. In this paper I will describe the notion of transpersonal responsibility in greater philosophical depth than has been done in my previous work.

I recognize that there are some significant and important differences in the philosophies set forth by Buber and Levinas (Atterton, Calarco, & Friedman, 2004). It is not my intention to address these differences with this paper, but rather I will draw from these great thinkers in a way that promotes dialogue about how we go about fulfilling our responsibility to the other.

I will begin by briefly explaining Buber's relational ontology of human existence that I base my general approach upon. Here I distinguish myself from Levinas who bases his existential philosophy on an *ethics* of responsibility for the other, as opposed to Buber's relational ontology. However, I will soon return to a Levinasian ethics of responsibility in my proceeding discussion of authenticity in relationships. Authenticity in relation to the other is an outgrowth of fulfilling our responsibility to others and denotes a fundamental respect of their humanity (or honoring of their existence if you will). Together, living authentically, we form a

genuine community. The notion of community thus ultimately underlies the notion of transpersonal responsibility.

### ***The Role of Dialogue***

I base the various ideas set forth in this paper on Buber's relational ontology that he explicated most directly in *I and Thou*, *Between Man and Man*, and *Knowledge of Man*. Buber contends that humans are fundamentally relational beings and the "I" or the self never exists in isolation. When we speak of an "I" we simultaneously imply a relation to another being, and we are free to choose whether we respond to the other as an "It" or a "Thou." In other words, Buber says that our choice is not whether or not to be in relation to others (we always are), but the nature of that relationship as either a circumscribed, means to end relation (I-It), or an intimate moment of meeting where we stand in reverence of another who also chooses to reveal him or herself in equal presentness of being.

In an I-Thou encounter, a person turns toward the other person and confirms his or her being and reveres the other for simultaneously opening him- or herself in such a way. Friedman (1955) explains that realm of I-Thou "is characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability" (p. 57). As we turn towards the other we are mutually open to the encounter and give the other person the opportunity to confirm us as well. In other words, we become a self or fully human in the presence and confirmation of others.

In contrast to an I-Thou encounter, an I-It relationship is monological and subjective rather than dialogical and interhuman. Friedman (1955) explains, "the I-It is the primary word of experiencing and using. It takes place within a man and not between him and the world. Hence it is entirely subjective and lacking in mutuality" (p. 57). The other person is not in genuine dialogue with us as we set him or her at a distance and do not attempt to experience the other's side of the relationship. Instead, we are using the other person as a means to an end rather than a partner in dialogue.

Buber recognizes that much of our day-to-day lives are lived in I-It encounters, and he does not construe the I-It relation as bad or wrong per se but a less meaningful way or de-humanized mode of experiencing the world. Friedman (1955) says, "it is only the reliability of its ordered and surveyable world which sustains man in life. One cannot meet others in it, but only through it can one make oneself 'understood' with others" (p. 60). Without the realm of I-It, we would not have a sense of continuity and constancy across time and place, and without order and utilitarian knowledge we would be lost in a reality without finitudes. Buber describes a flexible dialectic between I-It and I-Thou in a person's life in order to maintain both stability and purpose of one's existence.

### ***Levinas and the Ethics of Responsibility***

Emanuel Levinas is another prolific philosopher who writes about the nature of human relationships. However, unlike Buber, Levinas is primarily concerned with ethical matters and holds that our ethical responsibility to the Other proceeds questions of ontology, freedom, and intentionality. Levinas was fond of quoting a line from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that captures the essence of his ethical stance: "*We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others.*" (Levinas, 1985, p. 98-9, italics in original). He continues to explain that "this is not owing to such or such a guilt which is really mine, or to offenses that I would have committed; but because I am responsible for a total responsibility" (Levinas, 1985, p. 98-9).

Similar to Buber's notion that we do not choose whether or not to be in relation to the other, Levinas says that we do not choose whether or not we are responsible to the Other. We are already guilty before the Other and our freedom lies in how we choose to respond to the call. Kunz (1998) writes about the paradoxical power of the weak, which is their ability to call us to respond to their need.

One of the key distinctions between Levinas's notion of responsibility and Buber's I-Thou relation is that Levinas posits an unequal relational stance between I and Thou—the Other calls upon us to responsibility from a position of height and infinite transcendence:

“The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement—glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.” (Levinas, 1969, p. 251)

The ethical dimension of height implies a notion of the transcendent, the infinite, or God, if you will, that calls to us in the face of the Other. We are most authentically ourselves and are fulfilling the purpose of our existence when we fully offer our resources to the needs of others. Although we do not respond to the needs of others with an expectation of reciprocity or mutuality, we are, in turn, an infinite Other in the eyes of other people as well. In contrast, Buber holds that the I-Thou exists in a mutual and reciprocal relation of receiving the other from a stance of full presence and reverence. However, Buber does appear to agree with Levinas on the point that responsibility to the other is the foundation of a relational ethics when he states, “responsibility presupposes one who addresses me primarily, that is, from a realm independent of myself and to whom I am answerable” (Buber, BMM, p. 45). In turn, I am focusing on the common theme of responsibility to the other as a way of drawing out some of the important commonalities between Buber and Levinas. Finally, Levinas (1985) reminds us that “at no time can one say: I have done all my duty...It is in this sense that there is an opening beyond what is delimited; and such is the manifestation of the Infinite” (p. 108). In the same sense that Being is an ever-evolving process, our responsibility to others does not have an endpoint or tangible goal. In fact, Levinas (1969) writes, “duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am” (p. 244). With these ethical principles, along with Buber's relational ontology in mind, I will now turn to the concept of authenticity in our dialogues with others.

### ***Transpersonal Responsibility***

Previously, I have written about the concept of transpersonal responsibility (Adame & Leitner, 2010). Transpersonal responsibility is defined as “an ongoing commitment to respond to the needs of humanity and the world at large” (Adame & Leitner, 2010, p. 55). Transpersonal responsibility follows from the notion that our existence is integrally intertwined with others as well as the natural world. Beginning with our fellow persons, because our identities are co-constituted in these ever-evolving relationships, we are also personally responsible for the role we play in other people's lives. Implicit in Buber's concept of genuine dialogue is responsibility to the other, which we fulfill by bringing ourselves fully into relation, holding nothing back as we respond to the needs of the other. I want to expand this notion of the I-Thou dyad to an awareness of the transpersonal nature of responsibility. Imagine the shift in society that might occur if we focused even a fraction of the attention we pay to self-image and self-presentation towards the needs of others. I believe it would result in a shift in consciousness—from ego-

centered to one of social justice, an ethics of care or feminist ethics, and of course, a Levinasian ethics.

In his book, *The Way of Man*, Buber (1966) recounts a Hasidic parable about God calling to Adam which we believe helps to explicate the notion of transpersonal responsibility, albeit in religious metaphor. In the story, God asks Adam, “Where art Thou?” which at first glance seems to be an odd question since God is all knowing. So why does God ask this question of Adam? Buber explains that it is the effect such a calling produces in us (for we are all Adams); it stirs our hearts to search for meaning in our existence and calls us to take responsibility for where we are in our lives. However, Buber also acknowledges that most of us are guilty of hiding from the question, “Where art Thou?,” and, by avoiding the call of the Other, we fail to take responsibility for our part in the unfolding drama of existence. Furthermore, we become estranged from ourselves when we avoid the call of the other. Buber (1966) says, “man cannot escape the eye of God, but in trying to hide from him, he is hiding from himself” (p. 12). In Buber’s story the Other is God. However, the message holds true for any dialogue of call and response between two relational beings. In either case, the call of the other both asks us to respond genuinely (with one’s whole being) to him or her, and also asks us to attend to our place in the world—thus answering the question, “Where art Thou?”

The way I conceptualize transpersonal responsibility also takes into account this simultaneous unity of attending to the other as also attending to the self (and vice versa). The other is never seen as a means to the end of self-realization, self-salvation, or self-fulfillment. Both Buber and Levinas agree that the other is regarded as an end unto itself and any benefit of that commitment to ourselves is simply a by-product of that connection.

Buber and Levinas both stress that responsibility to the call of the other and authenticity in our response is the basis of a relational ethics. In *Between Man and Man*, Buber (1965) criticizes philosophers who focus on the self-development and personal (self-bounded) responsibility. Buber (1965) explains that,

“Where no primary address and claim can touch me, for everything is ‘My property,’ responsibility has become a phantom. At the same time life’s character of mutuality is dissipated. He who ceases to make a response ceases to hear the Word” (p. 45).

Buber explains that the sort of individualism that has emerged from Romanticism, scientism, and modern culture misses the point of ethics altogether as we become obsessed with self-salvation rather than the salvation of the world. Nietzsche takes up a similar critique: “It is also a disease, that can destroy man, this first outburst of strength and will to self-determination, self-valorisation, this will to *free* will: and how much disease is expressed by the wild attempts and peculiarities with which the freed man, the separated man, now tries to prove his rule over things!” (Nietzsche, HATH, p. 5)

In such a circumstance, others exist to support and nourish our own project of self-development and the relation remains at an I-It level rather than genuine meetings of mutuality and reverence. Such a stance also makes responsibility to the other a side-issue that we may or may not choose to engage, rather than a foundational ethics in which we are beholden to the call of the Other (Levinas, 1969, 1985, 2003). The numerous consequences of such a stance are reflected in the violent, destructive, and thoughtless treatment of other people and the environment.

It is also important to keep in mind with all this talk of responsibility to the other that we do not lose sight of the reciprocal and ultimately self-sustaining nature of this ethics of care. In other words, a common critique of such a system of ethics is that I will be emotionally drained and overwhelmed if I felt the afflictions of the world all too acutely. Nietzsche cautions, “whoever would be truly able to participate in it would have to despair about the value of life; if he were able to grasp and feel mankind’s overall consciousness in himself, he would collapse with a curse against existence” (Nietzsche, *HATH*, p. 32). A fair warning to keep in mind, however, both Buber and Levinas are clear that as we fully respond to the needs of the other, others turn to us as a Thou as well and we are continuously renewed in our relationships with others. Commenting on Levinas’s work, Diprose (2009) notes, “as for responsibility for the other, I do not get reduced to pure passivity or to a thing because the uniqueness expressed in my corporeal reflexivity emerges through and is supported by the welcome of the other others who are responsible for me” (p. 131).

### ***Authenticity and Community***

As I mentioned previously, together, living authenticity in our relations with others, underlies the notion of genuine community where we are guided by localized ethics of care and a strong sense of responsibility for the greater good. However, it is painfully obvious that such community is hard to come by, particularly in Western culture with its heavy emphasis on competition, scientism, radical individualism, and consumerism just to name a few of the ways in which we become alienated and isolated units. Rollo May (1967) notes, “when people feel their insignificance and individual persons, they also suffer an undermining of their sense of human responsibility” (p. 31). May warns that the great danger of our time is the increasing sense of apathy, meaninglessness, and loss of purpose in our actions. Instead of simply going through the motions in life, May urges us to act from a place of caring (congruent with Levinas’s sense of responsibility) in all of our interactions recognizing that each of us has a role to play in the unfolding drama of existence.

Both Levinas and Buber argue that a central component in living ethically in a community is authenticity in our response to others. Echoing Levinas’s a priori ethical stance of readiness to respond fully to others, Buber reflects on authenticity in this way: “I call a great character one who by his actions and attitudes satisfies the claim of situations out of deep readiness to respond with his whole life, and such a way that the sum of his actions and attitudes express at the same time the unity of his being in its willingness to accept responsibility” (quoted in Walters, 2003, p. 34). Finally, Buber warns against the types of communities that eliminate personal responsibility, or worse, gives the semblance that people in the crowd have choices and responsibility when in fact it is an illusion. Buber was specifically commenting on the difference between organically created socialist communities, such as the kibbutz, where the individual and collective exists in a fairly balanced a mutually self-sustaining relation, and totalitarian communities that have only the illusion of individual influence over the collective. Again, Buber points to the dialectic between a person’s responsibility to the collective and the collective’s responsibility to its members that underlies the notion of genuine community.

The psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott also commented on the notion of genuine community in a way greatly reminiscent of Buber’s description: “When healthy persons come together they each contribute a whole world, because each brings a whole person...they are capable of becoming depressed, rather than automatically joining group manias and seeking domination of

others” (quoted in Praglin, 2006, p. 7). In other words, when we relate to others as whole persons or Thou, this also means that we bring our struggles as well as our strengths to the dialogue in a genuine community. Recognizing human shortcomings and struggles as well as strengths and passions aids in not being naively idealistic or positing simplistic utopian solutions to complex social problems. Here again that we see the balance between the personal and the collective when we speak of participation in genuine community.

### **Conclusions**

Buber and Levinas’s work helps to illuminate the process by which “authentically existing individuals who recognize each other’s humanity constitute a community” (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p. 67). Genuine community begins with and is sustained by our commitment (via our actions and attitudes) to responding to the call of the other. Buber’s relational ontology and Levinas’s ethical stance challenge us to break out of our Western cultural viewpoint of self-contained individualism and take up the notion of transpersonal responsibility. Buber (1957) once said, “the world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through embracing one of its beings” (p. 27). In other words, it is through the experience of I-Thou relating that we can grow to truly appreciate the greater connectedness of the world and have “compassion for things I’ll never know.”

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