

# An ethics of responsibility and the origin of morality

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This article investigates the nature of an 'Ethics of Responsibility' (ER) as well as its significance for the broader research project dealt with, namely 'Morality in History'. The article starts off with a conceptual analysis of the notions of 'morality' and 'ethics', followed by an exposition of Alasdair MacIntyre's formulation of the 'anomaly' of current-day moral theory. This leads to a comprehensive analysis of MacIntyre's argument as to why the Enlightenment project was, according to him, doomed to failure and a return to Aristotle is essentially called for. Consequently, the approach known as the ER is introduced, drawing on the work of Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, Richard Niehbur, Richard Bernstein, William Schweiker and Aristotle. The following concepts are analysed and integrated into the framework of the ER, namely accountability (Schweiker), reciprocity (Levinas), fallibility (Van Niekerk), futurity (Jonas), the dialectic between normativity and applications (Bernstein) and phronesis (Aristotle).

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The article argues that the theoretical model of an 'ethics of responsibility' contributes significantly to reflection on the 'origins of morality'. The 'anomaly' of current-day moral theory is analysed. This is followed by a comprehensive exposition of the ER. This model of ethical conceptualisation bestows even more clarity on the intra- and interdisciplinary implications of the article, as a model is developed, drawing on the work of Jonas, Levinas, Schweiker and others, that utilises the insights of Aristotle and thereby transcends the approaches to moral reasoning of Modernity.

**Keywords:** responsibility; anomaly; Aristotle; Levinas; ethics; morality; MacIntyre; virtues.

## Morality and ethics: An 'unsettling anomaly'

We are indeed, as suggested by the organisers of this project and the conference by which it was precipitated, dealing with an 'unsettling anomaly' in our efforts to understand the nature of, and come to grips with, the phenomenon of *morality*, the importance of which is widely accepted in our world and times.

In my understanding, 'morality' – differently from the notion of 'ethics' – refers to the phenomenon that human beings universally submit their behaviour to the judgement of others, or, better stated, to the 'demands of obligation',<sup>1</sup> which simply means that humans universally acknowledge that the question about the moral status, that is, the wrongness or rightness of human action, is a legitimate question.

'Ethics', in contradistinction to 'morality', refers to the *more intellectual enterprise* of trying to identify, analyse, understand and critically develop the actual action guides ('theories') that govern the moral status of human behaviour, as well as applying those action guides to concrete moral challenges or dilemmas.

In short, *morality* is a behavioural phenomenon that can be observed and/or discerned in society in the sense that the normative dimension (that of which we declare that it 'ought' to be or to happen) is apparent, recognisable and applicable. *Ethics*, on the other hand, is a *kind of philosophy*, that is, an exercise in reflection about concepts and ideas. Both morality and ethics are concerned with the normative nature and impact of some concepts, ideas and practices in human existence.

But I am arguing that, in the case of 'morality', we are referring to a key aspect of our common behaviour that, in a certain sense, can be observed or experienced. I 'see' morality every time I observe a person helping another in need. I do not 'see and/or observe' ethics in that sense, unless I am engaged in ethical argumentation and its outcome (i.e. the publications and/or texts and/or lectures that emerge from ethical deliberation).

1.The Afrikaans language says it better: 'Mense onderwerp hul gedrag universeel aan 'n behorensis'.

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## Enter Alasdair MacIntyre

Wherein, then, does the ‘anomaly’ of current-day moral philosophy reside? With ‘anomaly’ we usually understand something that deviates from what is standard, normal or expected. Hence, MacIntyre formulates his idea of the anomaly of our time as essentially having to do with the assumption that moral philosophy is a consistent tradition since Greek times.

One of the most striking formulations of this ‘anomaly’ is one produced by the Oxford (later University of Notre Dame) philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre. He introduces his (now classic) *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1982) with what he identifies as a ‘disquieting suggestion’. This suggestion, he writes, is the hypothesis:

... that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in ... [a] state of grave disorder, What we possess ... are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts of which now lack those contexts from which their [earlier] significance derived. We possess indeed *simulacra*<sup>2</sup> of morality; we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely if not entirely – lost our *comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality*. (MacIntyre 1982:2; *author’s own emphasis*)

As the book develops,<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre grapples extensively with the cause of this ‘loss’. That cause is, above all, the phenomenon of *Modernity* or, as MacIntyre prefers to call it, the *Enlightenment*. Later, in his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, he refers to the ‘Enlightenment’ as ‘Encyclopedia’ – that which he regards as the overarching intellectual culture of our times, but also (according to one of his chapters) a ‘project that had to fail’ (Chapter 5 of *After Virtue*).

Why was the Enlightenment project inevitably doomed for failure? Because of the ‘anomaly’ or ‘malaise’ already referred to.

MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment and/or Modernist morality theoreticians were heirs to a tradition in which ethics only made sense within a conceptual scheme comprising three components:

- Man-as-he-happens-to-be (resp. ‘untutored human nature’).<sup>4</sup>
- Man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-*telos* (aim/purpose).
- The moral precepts that enable Man to move from the one to the other (MacIntyre 1982:51).

The trouble is that, in terms of this necessary threefold conceptual scheme, the thinkers of Modernity and/or the Enlightenment preferred to abandon the necessity of the second element (the idea that man has some purpose or ‘*telos*’

2. Author’s own emphasis.

3. Following his earlier book, *A short history of ethics*, MacIntyre has, in a jocular fashion, been reproached for writing his (in)famous threefold (*After virtue, Whose justice? Which rationality? and Three rival versions of moral enquiry*) as a ‘very long history of ethics’!

4. Apologies for the sexist language. I am deliberately using MacIntyre’s own language.

in life). Consequently, they were left with the conviction that our moral identity springs entirely from conceptions of our ‘untutored human nature’, provided with a set of moral precepts that we have the freedom to apply as we wish. That yielded the realisation that only one of the two possibilities are left. The first is the range of incommensurable moral theories emanating from Enlightenment thinking (Kantianism; utilitarianism), and the second is the radical subjectivism and relativism of Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom the ‘*gynealogy of morals*’ is wholly the outcome of the exercise of unbridled human freedom.

MacIntyre (1982) argues in this regard:

*Either* one must follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic, *or* one must hold that the Enlightenment project was *not only mistaken, but should never have been commenced in the first place*. *There is no third alternative*<sup>5</sup> and more particularly there is no alternative provided by those thinkers at the heart of the contemporary conventional curriculum in moral philosophy – Hume, Kant and Mill. It is no wonder that the teaching of ethics is so often destructive and sceptical in its effects upon the minds of those taught. (pp. 111–112; *author’s own emphasis*)

Because both of these options – options that directly give content to the anomaly referred to at the beginning – are unacceptable to MacIntyre, the only way out for him is the return to and the embracing of the *tradition of the virtues*, as developed in classical Greek thinking – Aristotle (1953) in particular.

MacIntyre writes in this regard that the moral philosophers of the 18th century were engaged in something unattainable. On the one hand, they tried to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs (cf. Kant’s Categorical Imperative). The trouble was that they inherited a set of moral prescriptions as well as a conception of human nature (religion was abandoned in this conception) that had been expressly designed to be irreconcilable – that is, reason rules supreme.

This discrepancy was not removed by their beliefs about human nature. They inherited incoherent fragments of a once coherent scheme of thought and action, and as they did not recognise their own peculiar historical and cultural situation, they could not recognise the impossible and quixotic character of their self-appointed task (1982:53).

Later on, MacIntyre (1982) continues:

[T]he defensibility of the Nietzschean position turns *in the end*<sup>6</sup> on the answer to the question: was it right in the first place to reject Aristotle? For if Aristotle’s position in ethics and politics – or something very like it – could be sustained, the whole Nietzschean enterprise would be pointless. This is because the power of Nietzsche’s position depends upon the truth of one central thesis: that all rational vindications of morality manifestly

5. Author’s own emphasis.

6. MacIntyre’s emphasis.

fail and that *therefore* belief in the tenets of morality needs to be explained in terms of a set of rationalisations which conceal the fundamentally non-rational phenomena of the will. My own argument obliges me to agree with Nietzsche that the philosophers of the Enlightenment never succeeded in providing grounds for doubting his central thesis. (p. 111)

MacIntyre has great respect for Nietzsche – particularly for the latter’s insight into the inevitability of the failure of the ‘Enlightenment Project’ and the force and prevalence of the emotivism that it generates. But MacIntyre is no Nietzschean himself. The failure of the Enlightenment Project persuades him that there is only one outcome available in our efforts to come to grips with the anomaly referred to at the beginning. That outcome is the *return to the ethics of the virtues* – the one approach to moral theorising that can and does accommodate the threefold scheme referred to earlier. Much of the rest of his treatise is then spent on a dedicated analysis of the ‘core concept of the virtues’.

## The ‘core concept of the virtues’

This analysis draws on the work of Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle, but MacIntyre (1982) gives it his own particular slant. He defines virtue as:

[A]n acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods. (p. 178)

MacIntyre’s (1982) ‘unitary core concept of the virtues’ then proceeds in ‘three stages’:

The first stage requires a background account of what I shall call a *practice*, the second of what I have already characterised as the *narrative order of a single human life* and the third an account ... of what constitutes a *moral tradition*. Each later stage presupposes the earlier, but not vice versa. (p. 174)

MacIntyre’s contribution was preceded and runs parallel to a distinct revival of interest in virtue ethics – the oldest branch of ethics theory – in the course of the 20th century. This revival was particularly precipitated by an acclaimed article by Elizabeth Anscombe (1958). Her main claim was that the moral philosophy of necessity presupposes a moral authority or ‘law-giver’, which is sorely lacking in the kind of moral philosophy prevalent in her time. In her well-known article, Anscombe in particular rejects consequentialism: the theory that claims that the moral status of acts is entirely determined by the consequences of the acts. If that is indeed the case, it is quite possible to argue that certain blatantly unjust acts (e.g. framing an innocent individual for allegedly provoking social unrest while the individual is, in fact, entirely without blame for the incident) are morally in order, as blaming the individual creates better consequences for most people involved in events.

Anscombe therefore pleads for a return to virtue ethics. Daniel Weltman (2022) writes about her argument:

The virtue ethicist focuses on what is just and unjust, courageous and cowardly, wise and unwise ... By developing a theory of human virtue, which requires a psychological and philosophical investigation into what a good human life consists of, Anscombe thinks we can return moral philosophy to a place where we can come up with concrete answers. Consequentialism, meanwhile, gives us no concrete answers; everything depends on the consequences. (n.p.)

Much can be said about the advantages of virtue ethics. Apart from Anscombe’s point, virtue ethics provides for and in fact requires *moral motivation* in a way not self-evidently so in the other well-known approaches to moral conceptualisation in modernity.

Consider, for illustration, the following example. I make the acquaintance of a renowned businessman who is known to be wealthy and who insists on setting aside every Friday afternoon of his schedule in order to serve the poor and destitute in a soup kitchen that he also sponsors. In a conversation that I have with him, I express my admiration for this admirable philanthropy.

His response to me is rather surprising. The first thing he tells me is that he hates every minute of his Friday afternoon excursions. Upon my question as to, if he so hates this work, why does he persist with it, his answer is simple and blunt: ‘Because it is the right thing to do’ – ‘the right thing to do’ as clearly prescribed by theoretical stances such as utilitarianism or deontology.

What is the problem here? We are morally uncomfortable with this rich philanthropist’s actions every Friday afternoon because he strives to ‘do the right thing’ without any motivation. This clearly demonstrates that *motivation cannot be abandoned in moral action*. But theoretical frameworks such as deontology and utilitarianism are seemingly not at all concerned with (moral) motivation. That is where virtue ethics is indeed different (even superior). For someone who espouses morality and virtue, moral motivation is essential. One of the great strengths of virtue ethics is that it shows why unmotivated ‘moral action’ lacks credibility.

In addition, virtue ethics legitimises special moral relationships in a way that is not possible in, for example, deontology and utilitarianism.<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre’s book also provides an ample demonstration of the role of a practice, a tradition and the need for some *telos* – some ‘narrative’ unity of a single human life – in the conceptualisation of virtue.

## Impediments to virtue ethics

There are nevertheless two other serious impediments to following Anscombe and MacIntyre and to definitively adopting virtue ethics. The *first* is the fact that *public policy can hardly be built on a virtue ethics approach*. It is of little relevance to try and uphold a virtue ethics approach to moral problems when decisions need to be made about policy matters, for

7.This is persuasively argued by Rachles and Rachels (2019):180–182.

example when the ethical challenge is the just distribution of health care resources. In this case, it is quite likely to expect from 'Enlightenment' thinkers that the eventual decision about the ethical issue will suggest a prescription such as 'act like a utilitarian'.<sup>8</sup> Whatever else may be argued for or against consequentialism or utilitarianism, what cannot be denied is that these approaches to moral theorising do enable one to justify public policy in a manner that claims moral status. Few policy arrangements proposed and executed by governments are not, in some way and at some time, justified by drawing on the idea that the relevant policy serves the general public interest the best. The latter, of course, is a purely consequentialist argument.<sup>9</sup>

The second impediment to the MacIntyrean brand of virtue ethics is that I find MacIntyre's project of the *complete rejection of the Enlightenment* program of moral theorising *incredible* and *disingenuous*. This point has been well developed by Richard Bernstein in a thoughtful review of *After virtue*. The simple point to be made in this regard is the acknowledgement that if one is serious about restoring the ethos of the virtues, one is compelled to recognise and acknowledge the fact that Aristotle's notion of virtue and the good that it bestows originated and functioned in an intellectual framework very different from the way people think and act nowadays. That framework could be (and is) termed 'metaphysical' – exactly that kind of intellectual orientation that was greatly abandoned in Modernity.

The person or community who adopts virtue ethics is therefore logically compelled to also adopt something like Aristotle's metaphysical biology for the sake of attaining intellectual coherence. Surely that is not what MacIntyre has in mind! In the Aristotelian polis in which Aristotle – the champion of virtue culture and ethics – operated, women were not members of the polity, let alone slaves and 'barbarians' (i.e. non-members of the polity).<sup>10</sup> MacIntyre surely does not want to return to a culture where women have no rights. However, where does MacIntyre attain or adopt this very value of the equality of women? Surely nowhere else than in Modernity! The hold of Modernity over all of us is much stronger than MacIntyre is clearly willing to acknowledge.

## Ethics of responsibility

Thus we see, in spite of all the strengths and the (partly) conceptual coherence of MacIntyre's work, virtue ethics will in the long run – and attuned to our identities as products of

8.This has extensively been worked out by dr Lyn Horn in PhD dissertation under my supervision. (Horn 2010).

9.To illustrate in this regard: in a book published as vice-president of South Africa's first democratically elected government, Tladi Mofokeng relates how his approach to the formulation of public policy changed in the course of his term of office. Gone was now all (semi-)Marxist rhetoric about the desirability of socialism and the rule of the working class. In came abruptly the search for 'the public good' – a purely utilitarian concern. This was indeed the experience of a number of other governments/rulers. (See Mofokeng 1998:3–26) It is one thing to proclaim virtue as the key to morality. It is quite another thing to construe moral action guidelines on the basis of the belief in virtue.

10.Literally those who could not speak Greek, but who spoke 'bar-bar', that is 'barbarians'!

Modernity – not do. For the reasons just provided, I wish to explore a different path. Following the lead of a number of possibly less acclaimed thinkers than Anscombe and MacIntyre, I wish to explore the idea of an *ethics of responsibility* (ER) as a position that better addresses the 'unsettling anomaly' addressed since the start of this paper.<sup>11</sup>

Though I fully acknowledge the pivotal role played by Max Weber<sup>12</sup> in founding and originally developing an ER, the sense in which I will mostly be using the term draws more on the work of the German philosopher Hans Jonas as well as that of Emmanuel Levinas and, to a lesser extent, Zygmunt Bauman.<sup>13</sup> The willingness and ability to accept responsibility in morally challenging situations are pivotal for these thinkers.

Before developing my own perspective on ER, I wish to draw attention to some valuable perspectives on the notion of (an ethics of) responsibility in the work of William Schweiker (1993). Schweiker strikingly points out the two fundamental perspectives from which the idea of responsibility derives its meaning. One is first of all *responsible for the past*, in the sense that, for example, former adherents of Nazism or apartheid are regarded as responsible for those ideologies and the social atrocities associated with them. But one is also *responsible for the future*, in the sense that, for example, one assumes responsibility for the education of one's children or the facilitation of economic growth – acts that project one towards the *future*.

Schweiker (1993) formulates it in the following way:

To be a moral agent is to be responsible *for oneself* through responding *to others* and being accountable *for bringing something into being* through the exercise of power. (p. 620)

Three basic concepts figure prominently in a cogent representation of ER. This first is *accountability*, which amounts to assigning culpability – the grounds for praise and blame. Schweiker (1993) writes:

The idea that persons are liable for their debt to others and must account for this, is the connection between accountability and responsibility. We might, in this respect, specifically refer to the work of the American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr. (p. 627)

11.For the discussion that follows, I will draw on the following previous publication of mine: Van Niekerk (2020).

12.Cf. Weber's famous speech 'Science as vocation', <http://www.wisdom.weizmann.ac.il/~oded/X/WeberScienceVocation.pdf>. See also the recent book by Etienne De Villiers (2018).

13.I shall particularly draw on the work of Levinas. (Cf. his 1985). The French thinker André Comte-Sponville also writes grippingly about the need for an ER. He states: 'Preferable for us to an ethic of conviction is what Max Weber calls an ethic of responsibility (Verantwortungsethik), which, without disregarding principles (how could it?), concerns itself as well with foreseeable consequences of action. Good intentions can lead to catastrophe, and purity of motivation has never been able by itself to prevent the worst. Good motives aren't enough, and it would be wrong to act as though they were: hence an ethic of responsibility requires that we answer not just for our intentions or principles but also for the consequences of our acts, to the extent that they can be foreseen. It is an ethic of prudence, and the only valid ethic. Better to lie to the Gestapo than to turn in a Jew or a Resistance fighter. But in the name of what? In the name of prudence which is the apt determination (for man and by man) of what better means. This is applied morality, but then what should one make of a morality that cannot be applied? Without prudence, the other virtues are merely good intentions that pave the way to hell' (Comte-Sponville 1996:31). Here is already a suggestion of the relevance of the Aristotelean notion of 'phronesis' (prudence) for the understanding of an ER – an idea that I worked out elsewhere. See also the work of Van Niekerk (2002a, 2002b), on which this article sometimes draws.

Different from that argued by Levinas, Niehbuhr insists that we do anticipate the reactions of other people to what we ourselves do when we act. Schweiker (1992) argues in this regard:

We ought to understand ourselves as accountable in the present with respect to the past and in anticipation of future courses of action. (p. 623)

The second concept of relevance here is 'answerability'. To be responsible necessarily means to *answer* or to be willing to answer the other. This represents the *normative dimension of responsibility*. Schweiker (1992) writes in this respect:

[T]he form of understanding characteristic of moral agents is rightly characterized as *dialogical* in character. We are creatures who must answer for our lives with respect to what or who questions us. The dimension of answerability concerns the relations, norms and values by which we ought to make decisions as these are 'heard' by the self. (pp. 620–621; *author's own emphasis*)

This explains the relevance of 'hearing' in the ER. It is of significance that in the Jewish-Christian-Islam traditions, moral prescriptions are often 'heard' in situations with fundamentally auditive dimensions (God speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, Mohammed receiving the Kor'an in the Medina cave, etc.). The responsive-dialogical dimension of responsibility for Schweiker (1993) eventually entails the fact or claim that:

[W]e are accountable for what we do and answerable to something or someone insofar as we are responsible for ourselves. This dimension of responsibility denotes the moral identity of an individual or a community. (p. 619)

The acceptance of responsibility amounts to being willing to be held accountable for decisions that a moral actor is required to make. To be able to accept responsibility in this sense presupposes that the moral actor is capable of providing reasons for whatever actions he or she took, that the reasons are available, clearly formulated and that these reasons are thoroughly thought through, even if it turns out that they are faulty or unsustainable.

I have, elsewhere, elaborated on my conception of an ER as follows. It is (Van Niekerk 2002a):

an approach where, on the basis of recognition of the moral ambivalence associated with most of the phenomena in the social world, the main task of moral judgement is not deemed as consistency within a single paradigm, but the acceptance of responsibility for whatever line of action is recommended. This ethics acknowledges the benefits of a variety of approaches, but also admits the failures that can be identified in most of these approaches. An ethics of responsibility is a form of ethics that makes people – all people, not only health care workers and moral philosophers – accept responsibility for the world in which we live and which we create by means of science and technology. It is an ethics that no longer allows us to accept the idea that morality is exclusively determined by rules, codes and laws behind which people can comfortably hide when justifying the morality of actions in morally complex situations. It is an ethics of responsibility because it demands that we be accountable for everything that we invent and design in our attempts to construct, apply and evaluate our life ethos – i.e., the value system according to which we live. (pp. 40–41)

In what follows I discuss two of the most significant contributions in the development of an ER that reflection in the 20th century has yielded.

## Hans Jonas and the ethics of responsibility as an ethics of futurity

Consciously and unconsciously our actions are nowadays affecting environments and circumstances that are hardly reckoned with by the alleged 'natural moral impulse' according to which we normally act morally. The morality that we have inherited since modern times has always, according to Jonas, been 'a morality of proximity'. This morality is significantly inappropriate in a society, such as ours has become, where the actions that really matter no longer are those that only affect people in our observable proximity, but that have significant (and possibly destructive) effects over large distances in time and space. Jonas (1984) writes in this regard:

The good and evil about which action had to care [*traditionally - in pre-modern times*] lay close to the act, either in the praxis itself or in its immediate reach, and was not a matter of remote planning. The proximity of ends pertained to time as well as space... The ethical universe is composed of contemporaries and neighbours... All this has decisively changed. Modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale, objects and consequences that the framework of former ethics can no longer contain them. (pp. 7–8)

Jonas was, in this respect, one of the original thinkers who stressed the importance of an ethics that has to deal with the interests, not only of us here and now, but of future generations.<sup>14</sup> Jonas' thought, according to Arne Vetlesen, demonstrates 'the utter inadequacy of any ethics which links responsibility with reciprocity'. When future generations come into play, it would, if Jonas is right, be totally immoral to let ethically responsible actions be determined by reciprocally adequate responses. Future generations have an unqualified appeal to our sense of responsibility, irrespective of how they themselves act or neglect to act in their circumstances.

Vetlesen (as cited by Bauman 1993), draws on Levinas (which will be discussed in the next section) and continues as follows:

Unborn individuals cannot stand up and claim their rights; reciprocation is hopelessly beyond their reach. Yet this empirical fact ... does not exclude them as addressees of our responsibility. Their basic right is the right to a life on an ecologically inhabitable planet; lest we be careful they will never see the light of day at all. (p. 220)

## Levinas and the rejection of reciprocity

With this quote, the name of Emmanuel Levinas has been introduced. Levinas is a key role player in the inspiration and development of the ER. His contribution is particularly

14. See Bauman's discussion of this point in his (1993):219–222.

pertinent in response to the question as to whom we owe responsibility in the moral life. Our humanity for Levinas is defined by the claim that the Other makes on me and that I make upon them. Striking in Levinas' ideas (and different from Niebuhr's) is his insistence that, in spite of the Other's unconditional claim on me, there is no similar claim from my side on them. Put differently: my responsibility to respond to and act on the claim of the Other is not circumscribed by any obligation to reciprocity on their side.

As I have formulated it elsewhere (Van Niekerk 2020):

*The other is a claim upon me to which I am morally obliged to respond, without having the right to demand a reciprocal action from him/her. In this way Levinas argues that accountability towards the other, which also implicates accountability towards the environment within which the other and I must survive, is the only sustainably defensible basis for morality. (p. 207–227; author's own emphasis)*

This line of argumentation is inspired by Levinas' original argument about the alleged 'non-reducibility' and 'ungroundability' of morality. It has already been suggested that Levinas' idea of the reality of the Self is fully contained in our availability for other people. In a way akin to Descartes' insistence on thinking processes as the ground of subjectivity and thus humanity, Levinas (1985) insists that 'I am', not primarily because I think, but to the extent that 'I am there for (the sake of) others'. One must first be 'for' the other before you can be 'with' the other:

Being-for-the-Other is the origin rather than the product of all sociality. It precedes all other forms of relatedness to the Other, either through knowledge, evaluation, suffering or action. Moral responsibility therefore does not have any 'foundation', no cause or determining factor. The question: 'how is morality possible?', cannot be answered if no foundation or grounds can be identified for it. *There is no self that precedes the moral self.* Simply by being there, we are, essentially, there for the Other; by being there, we are responsible for the other. (p. 96; author's own emphasis)

The appeal that the Other makes on me is therefore unconditional. Levinas (1985) summarises his position in the following way:

The intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair ... I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others. The knot of subjectivity consists in going to the other without concerning oneself with his movement toward me. Or, more exactly, it consists in approaching in such a way that, over and beyond all the reciprocal relations that do not fail to get set up between me and the neighbour, I have always taken one step more toward him ... The neighbour concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused ... I am as it were ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representations or concepts the authority that commands me. Without asking myself: What then is it to me? Where does he get his right to command? What have I done to be from the start in debt? The face of a neighbour signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract. (pp. 98–99)

An ER is therefore an approach to moral reasoning, which definitively understands and justifies a commitment to the 'Other' as the fundamental characteristic of morality. The Other is a consistent appeal to me who encounters them in all spheres of life. That appeal provokes a response. Hence the centrality of the notion of 'responsibility' in this brand of moral reasoning and behaviour. A general trait of moral reasoning is best illustrated by this. We experience the appeal from the other and the response that it provokes as all-pervasive. It has been argued more than once that moral positions and arguments are most of the time inputs and considerations that tend to 'trump' all others. Powerful arguments in the spheres of religion, politics and social sciences are often made and can be quite persuasive. Yet, a sound moral argument, deduced from the ER, is mostly of such a nature that it tends to override the claims of other approaches when guidance is sought for human behaviour.

Before I conclude, it is important to point out that, as far as the coherence of an ER is concerned, there exists a paradox in Levinas' central that my responsibility is inscribed in the proximity of the Other, while Jonas, to whom I also referred earlier as an exponent of the 'ethics of responsibility', questions and critiques a 'morality of proximity', because it does not adequately accommodate the dire needs of future generations.

## Conclusion

I conclude by identifying and summarising the three central ideas of the ER that I have also developed elsewhere (Van Niekerk 2020). These ideas are closely associated with the notions of fallibilism, futurity and phronesis. Fallibilism conveys the idea that ethics demands of us, in spite of the need for careful argumentation, to, at one time or another, come to a decision. That decision may, after further reflection and in the light of changed circumstances, turn out to be the 'wrong' one – in the sense further reflection may yield a corrected vision. Yet what remains incontestable for an ER is the *need to actually decide*. We may fail when making moral decisions. Yet what can and must always be expected from the moral philosopher and moral agent is the ability and willingness to reconstruct coherent arguments in the light of which a decision was made – even if, in the long run, less desirable. Hence the acceptance of *fallibilism* – the acknowledgement that one might make mistakes in moral reasoning.

The second idea is *futurity*. This has been largely explained in what was said about the views of Hans Jonas earlier on. We no longer live in a world where the consequences of our actions only become manifest in immediate, contemporary and individual interactions. What we do and how we live have manifest consequences for our and others' lives in the future. Hence the importance of the notion of *futurity* as developed in the work of Hans Jonas.

The third and last of the ideas that summarise the ER as I understand it refers to the notion of the Greek term *phronesis*, meaning 'practical wisdom'. This is an idea originally

developed by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. I have developed the relevance of *phronesis* elsewhere (Van Niekerk 2013) and will not repeat it here.

For Plato, ethical knowledge is a form of metaphysical knowledge (*episteme; theoria*); it is the knowledge that is the result of the theoretical contemplation/review of the idea of the Good.

Although Aristotle does not deny that ethical knowledge is a knowledge of general moral norms, this is not all that can be said. *Ethical knowledge also comes to expression in practical situations and is therefore also a form of practical knowledge*. In the latter:

- A concrete situation must be judged in the light of knowledge of generally valid norms.
- Those norms must be able to be *applied in practice*; mere theoretical knowledge of those norms is not enough.
- Ethical knowledge is therefore more a case of ‘know how’ than ‘know what’. It is practical knowledge that requires application.

Aristotle therefore argues that practical knowledge (*phronesis*) is only learnt by practical experience. As important: *phronesis* develops in a *dialectical* manner – the dialect between general moral norms, rules or principles, on the one hand, and the demands of the practical situation in which those norms etc. need to be applied, on the other.

This dialectical process has everything to do with the acquisition and application of responsibility. We act responsibly in a moral context when we understand moral knowledge acquisition as a process of *phronesis*. In that manner, we attain practical wisdom.

In this way, I venture to argue that the ER is the preferred model of the origins of morality.

I conclude with a formulation by Richard Bernstein (1986), followed by one of the maestro (Aristotle) himself:

[P]*hronesis* is a form of reasoning and knowledge that involves a distinctive mediation between the universal and the particular. This mediation is not accomplished by any appeal to technical rules or Method (in the Cartesian sense) or by the subsumption of a pre-given determinate universal to a particular case ... *phronesis* is a form of reasoning which yields a typical ‘ethical know-how’ in which both what is universal and what is particular are co-determined. Furthermore, *phronesis* involves a ‘peculiar interlacing of being and knowledge, determination through one’s own becoming’.<sup>15</sup> It is not to be identified with or confused with the type of ‘objective knowledge’ that is detached from one’s own being and becoming. (p. 99)

In this idea lies the genius of Aristotle’s (1953) insight into the practice of *phronesis*:

But prudence is concerned with human goods, i.e. things about which deliberation is possible; for we hold that it is the function of the prudent man to deliberate well; and nobody deliberates

15.The quote is from Gadamer.

about things that cannot be otherwise, or that are not means to an end, and that end a practical good. And the man who is good at deliberation generally is the one who can aim, by the help of his calculation, at the best of the goods attainable by man. *Again, prudence [i.e. phronesis] is not concerned with universals only; it must also take cognisance of particulars, because it is concerned with conduct, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances.* (p. 213; author’s own emphasis)

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