ETHICS AND DISEMPOWERMENT

revisiting ethics, power, and oppression with Emmanuel Lévinas

William Timmerman
Honors Symposium 2014
HARRIET JACOBS (1813 –1897)
OPPORTUNITY WITH SAWYER

• Advantages
  • Prevent rape from her master
  • Win her freedom

• Downsides
  • Violate her conscience
  • Use Sawyer as tool
  • Possible children would be slaves
THE PROBLEM OF POWER

• "the condition of the slave confuses all principles of morality"

• Foucault: ethics is "freedom combined with reflection"

• We are all disempowered to a degree

• Ethics plays social role
INVERTING FREEDOM AND ETHICS
EMMANUEL LEVINAS (1906-1995)
Human Subjectivity

- What it means to be human

Meta-Ethics

- What makes ethics ‘ethical’

Ethics

- Duty
- Virtue
- Utility
- Morality
WHAT IT MEANS

**Things**
- We enjoy and consume
- Can be possessed
- Are beings

**People**
- We greet
- Cannot be possessed
- Are ‘beyond being’
WHY IS RESPONSIBILITY LIMITLESS?

• Responsibility is not from my decision

• “from the hither side of my freedom”

• ”the face is straightaway ethical”

• I am responsible for more than I intend
THE ENTRY OF THE THIRD

• Contradiction is a limit of responsibility

• "What do I have to do with justice?"

• Arbitrating between responsibility is not "constrained to a calculus"

• Legislating and coming together
FROM META-ETHICS TO ETHICS
PASSIVITY ETHICS

- Means no violence (no ego) to the other or towards yourself.

- Do unto other as they would do unto themselves.

- Always infinitely responsible for the other.
OUTCOME

• Ethics becomes a way of life not rules

• Disempowerment is not exceptional

• Ethics co-exists within power relations
We are the justice for the oppressed
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