

Responsibility and Fragility: An Ethical Reflection

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You have entrusted me with the presentation of a brief speech on this occasion where the honor of a doctorate *honoris causa* has been bestowed on my colleagues and myself.¹

It seemed to me that an ethical theme that could draw together various capabilities and convictions would be most appropriate for the circumstance. It was, therefore, in an ethical frame of mind that I chose the theme of *responsibility*, and decided to clarify it by coupling it with the theme of *fragility*.

In speaking of fragility, we ordinarily think of a physical condition that results from our weakness, our vulnerability, our subjection to sickness and to death. I would like to call attention to another kind of fragility that we humans, through our actions, add to our original finitude. Four domains immediately come to mind in which the massive intervention of technical procedures creates fragility at the same time that it creates power. The first of these domains is the eco-system that we render fragile through interventions. The noxious effects of such interference have made themselves palpable on a cosmic scale in both space and time. We render our humanity fragile by making our environment fragile. The second domain is that of the life sciences. Today, we possess the power

to influence our genetic inheritance and even to alter the biological identity of the human species. The third domain is that of the world economy. Recently, the common destiny of humanity has been uniquely affected by the establishment of a single world economy. At the same time, however, the ties which allow planetary solidarity have been rendered fragile by enormous disparities in wealth and the imbalances these create at all levels of communication. Finally, are now discovering with anxiety the fragility of our democratic institutions at the very time when they seem to have won the battle against the adverse model of totalitarianism. In each of these four domains—the environment, human biology, the world economy and our political institutions—fragility grows along with power, or the extension of the sphere of intervention through human action.

What then is the nature of the link between the fragility I have described and responsibility? At first glance, the response seems easy: our responsibility grows as our power increases which in turn begets a supplementary fragility. I wish, however, to enrich this response by establishing a more intimate link between responsibility and the fragile. I will say, along with Hans Jonas in *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984), that the specific counterpart of responsibility is the fragile. By the fragile I mean both those who may perish by virtue of natural weakness and those who are endangered by the blows of historical violence which are incorporated in human action.

The philosopher deems this a principle because it expresses itself from the start as an imperative which is preceded by nothing. We discover this principle through a certain feeling by which we are affected and moved on a fundamental level. We feel ourselves to be required or enjoined by the fragile to bring help, certainly, but more importantly to foster growth and to permit accomplishment and fulfilment.

Consider the birth of a child: by virtue of the fact that it is alive, it obliges. We are made responsible by the fragile. Yet what does “made responsible” mean? It means this: when the fragile is not something, but someone, as is the case in all of the domains considered above—individuals, groups, communities, humanity itself—this someone appears to us to be entrusted to our care, placed in our charge. We are charged with responsibility for someone.

But notice this image of the charge, or the burden that one takes onto oneself, should not be allowed to overwhelm another significant emphasis in the expression "entrusted to our care." The fragile someone counts on us, expects our help and our care, has confidence that we will attend his or her needs. This bond of confidence is fundamental and is intimately linked to the request, the command, the imperative. It is because of this bond that in our awareness of responsibility *we feel* that we have *made* responsible *for* and *by*. It is thus important that we consider it prior to the suspicion of a burden.

Let us stop here to take stock of the differences between an analysis of responsibility as fundamentally related to the fragile and a more traditional analysis of responsibility as being able to designate oneself the author of one's own acts. I do not wish to abolish this latter definition. If we were unable, after the fact, to reconstitute the course of our acts through recollection and gather these acts together around a focal point which we call ourselves, the author of our acts, no one else would be able to count on us either, or expect us to keep our promises. But consider how meagre this notion of responsibility is that emerges after the fact of the action: most significantly it is turned toward the past rather than towards the future. This this remains true even when we are ready to compensate for the damage caused by our actions (i.e., the definition of responsibility according to civil law) or when we shoulder the penal consequences of criminal acts (i.e., the definition of responsibility according to the penal code). Certainly the *acceptance* of consequences already constitutes a zone of the future in relation to the acts themselves. But these consequences have already been decided when the judgment is pronounced, and it is thus always backwards that we are drawn, towards retrospection. This cannot be the case when one responds to the call that comes from someone fragile. The primary question here must be: what will we do with this fragile being, what will we do for him or her? It is towards the future of a being, who must be helped to survive and to grow, that we are directed.

But the most important reversal is not this one. The capacity to designate oneself as the author of one's acts is affirmed, or better yet "vouched for," in a relation of self to self: I, myself . . . you, yourself . . . he/she, himself/herself, etc. The call, or command, as well as the confidence that proceeds from someone fragile establishes that it is

always *another* who declares us to be responsible, who makes us responsible, or, as Emmanuel Levinas says, *calls* us to responsibility. It is another, in counting on me, who makes me accountable for my acts.

I will not let myself sink into the sterile debate concerning which comes first: the capacity to designate oneself as the author of one's acts or the call of someone fragile. Let me say instead that a capability needs to be awakened in order for it to become real and effective, and that it is in the other's midst that we indeed become responsible. Conversely, as soon as others indicate their confidence to me or, as it is said, place their confidence in me, what they count on is precisely that *I* will keep my word, that *I* will behave as an agent, the author of my acts. Is it not finally a question of mutual recognition, of recognition whereby the other ceases to be alien and is treated like someone who is similar to me and in accord with fundamental human similarity?

Endnotes

1. This is an edited version of the Convocation address delivered at McGill University on 16 June 1992. A French version was published in *Cité Libre* 20, No. 7 (September 1992): 19-21.