An Endless Responsibility for Justice
- For a Levinasian Approach to Managerial Ethics

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Abstract

The moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas differs from traditional theories on ethics in that it unfolds in our relationship to the other rather than resides in some disposition of the moral subject. Levinasian ethics emphasises the endless responsibility imposed on us by the radical otherness of the Other and stresses the imperious demand we are facing as humans beings to be open for, prepared to and impassioned with that which we do not know already about ourselves or about the other. Such a demand goes far beyond our mere intellectual potential and deep into our bodily experience of otherness. It is therefore questionable whether bodiless subjects such as businesses or corporations can be moral subjects in a Levinasian sense. My answer is that they cannot and that if we are to speak of Levinasian ethics in organisational settings, it can not be a matter of business or corporate ethics but only a matter of managerial ethics. What such an ethics would be like is yet to be outlined and, as a contribution, I propose here a series of questions to ask managers that take up key features of Levinasian ethics such as responsibility, modesty, proximity or the difference between the saying and the said. I also propose to introduce into management a vocabulary of responsibility, justice, proximity and vulnerability. The purpose is to thereby provide managers with practical ways to experience alterity and expose themselves the radical otherness of the Other.

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For Emmanuel Levinas, ethics unfolds in our relationship to the other. One of his major philosophical claims is that our potential to open ourselves toward the Other, without setting any demand nor condition, is that which commands not only our possibility to grow an ethical relationship but even our mere being human beings. Being ethical – or being human – is being open for, prepared to and impassioned with the radical difference of the other, i.e. that which we do not know already about ourselves or about the other. As human beings, we have a responsibility to be ethical and this means to reach beyond the being of the other and delve without compromising into the unknown, and to a large extent unknowable, that is the Other’s infinite otherness. (Levinas 1961, 1974)

My claims are that such a definition of ethics does not only stop the mere possibility of a corporate or business ethics. It also sets the grounds for a radical redefinition of what managerial ethics could be. To support these claims, I first shortly describe the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, insisting on the centrality it gives to the bodily experience of the other. Building on the centrality of this bodily experience, I explain in the second section why corporations, being deprived of body, can hardly be regarded as moral subjects in a Levinasian sense. The possibility of a corporate or business ethics having been done away with, that which remains is only the possibility of a managerial ethics. I therefore reason in the third and final section about the possibility of a Levinasian managerial ethics and speculate about that which such an ethics could be, formulating my answer in a vocabulary of justice, proximity and vulnerability.

1. The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas

Approaching ethics from the perspective of Emmanuel Levinas implies approaching philosophy through ethics. As Philippe Nemo states (Levinas 1982), Levinas’ main thesis is that ethics is first philosophy, starting from which the other branches of metaphysics take their meaning.
Levinas grounds his ethics in a criticism of the history of philosophy and more particularly in a criticism of the correspondence that Western philosophical tradition establishes between knowledge, understood as unselfish contemplation, and Being, understood as the locus of the intelligible (1992/1998, p.67). His criticism is focused on the priority granted in Western philosophical tradition to Being before the existent. He criticises in particular how this tradition subordinates the personal relation with someone who is an existent (an ethical relation), to an impersonal relation with the Being of the existent of the other (a relationship of knowing) (1961, p.36). Levinas calls into question the ambition of philosophy to attempt at a universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable (sensé) to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world in its totality, leaving nothing outside itself, and thus become an absolute thought (1982, p. 69). Levinas wishes to divert us away from the priority given in Western philosophy to Being and Totality. He wishes to turn our attention instead toward that which is not included in this Totality, that which remains outside it, that is to say infinity (1961). Levinas strives after loosening us from the limits imposed on our understanding by our habits to think of knowledge, the other or the world in ontological terms. His project is to bring us beyond knowledge and essence, beyond essence to the otherwise than being (1974). And it is through a theory of ethics that he intends to carry out such a project.

Levinas does not conceive of ethics as a matter of distinguishing good from evil in acting. Ethics is for him a matter of heteronomous relation to the other. The ontological tradition, he means, reduces the other to the same. Apprehending the ontological Being of the Other supposes that one applies to the other one’s own analytical or judgmental categories. By so doing, one relates and brings back the other to oneself and, thereby, turn otherness into a same. Approaching the other in ontological terms involves that even when one means to speak of the other, one actually only speaks of oneself, a movement that Levinas calls egology (1961, p. 35). The ontological tradition reduces the other’s otherness as it negates her radical otherness. To an ontological approach, Levinas wishes therefore to substitute a non-allergic relation with alterity (Levinas 1961, p.38), one that caters for the other’s infinite otherness.

In front of the infinitude of human relationships, Levinas suggests to adopt an affective, nearly sensual, approach to the other and he grounds his ethics
in such an approach. He invites us (in pages that can at times be very expressive) to a phenomenological contemplation of the greeting, the face (more particularly the gaze or the smile), the caress or sexuality (1961, passim). He tells us that under special circumstances, ethics can even be found in the happy barking of a stray dog (1963). On the relationship to the face and how it opens on an incapacity to grasp the infinite of the other in its totality, Levinas writes for example:

Le visage se refuse à la possession, à mes pouvoirs. Dans son épiphanie, dans l’expression, le sensible, encore saisissable se mue en résistance totale à la prise. Cette mutation ne se peut que par l’ouverture d’une dimension nouvelle. En effet, la résistance à la prise ne se produit pas comme une résistance insurmontable comme dureté du rocher contre lequel la main se brise, comme éloignement d’une étoile dans l’immensité de l’espace. L’expression que le visage introduit dans le monde ne défie pas la faiblesse de mes pouvoirs, mais mon pouvoir de pouvoir. (1961. In 1990 edition, p. 215)

The Face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This mutation can occur only by the opening of a new dimension. For the resistance to the grasp is not produced as an insurmountable resistance, like the hardness of the rock against which the effort of the hand comes to naught, like the remoteness of a star in the immensity of space. The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power (In translation: 1969, p. 197-8)

Meeting the other stages for Levinas a face-to-face that raises an imperious moral urgency. My humanity is grounded in my subjectivity and this one is in turn grounded in my face-to-face with the other. The conditions of this face-to-face are also the conditions of my humanity. As a human being, the face that is in front of me summons me, asks for me and begs me (1992/1998, p. 96). The face is talking to me and “Thou shall not kill ” are not only its first words, they are also its first order: we must make theses words ours, there goes our moral responsibility.

The ethics of Emmanuel Levinas is an ethics of responsibility. Being ethical is being responsible for the other:


for the other, despite oneself, starting with oneself, the pain of labour in the patience of ageing, in the duty to give even the bead
out of one’s own mouth and the coat from one’s shoulder. (In translation: 1991, p. 55)

This responsibility for the other is immediate and not only a matter of perception. As soon as someone looks at me, I am responsible for her. I do not need to take any responsibilities toward her: This responsibility is mine and I can neither ignore nor refuse it:


I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair. It is precisely insofar as the relation between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjection to the Other; and I am ‘subject’ essentially in this sense. It is I who support all. (…) I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility more than all the others. (In translation: 1985, p. 98-9)
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Doing something for the other and giving: my responsibility is the identification mark of my humanity and spirituality. I am indeed totally subjected to it. It goes actually as far as being responsible for the life of the other before one’s own life – on this account Levinas clearly departs from Kant.

The philosophical signification of responsibility is the central theme in the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and a recurrent motive of broad theoretical elaboration in his writings. His elaboration on the differences between saying and the said (1974) – the former resisting the ontological character of the latter – opens for example on the issue of how to concretely take one’s responsibility toward the other and more generally how to define the conditions of one’s encounter with the other. His adding the presence of a third party to the interpersonal relationship one entertains with the other, opens likewise for the issue of justice: the interpersonal relationship that I entertain with the other facing me, I also need to entertain it with other; I have therefore a responsibility to moderate the privilege I grant to the other in front of me, hence to answer for justice (1982, p. 84).

Levinas’ ethics keeps redefining the terms of an unlimited personal responsibility that would start and end beyond ontology and therefore reach, beyond the Being of the other, the existent of the other’s radical otherness and thus the infinite humanity of human beings. It is in this sense that ethics is for Emmanuel Levinas first philosophy.

2) On the impossibility of a corporate ethics
What about the possibility of developing a corporate ethics (in the sense of an organisational ethics for for-profit organisations) if one approaches ethics in the footsteps of Emmanuel Levinas then? I will argue that it is none. My contention is that if one approaches ethics according to the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the mere possibility of speaking of a corporate ethics disappears and only the question of a managerial ethics remains – moreover on a reduced scale, as Levinasian moral criticism proves to be devastating when applied to managerial activities. I will develop the first part of this reasoning in this section and the second one in the next one.

Asserting that a corporation can be ethical in the sense given to the term by Emmanuel Levinas involves assuming that a corporation can develop
ways to open itself endlessly toward the otherness of the Other. Not only that a corporation can participate to a dialogue with others – that would simply reduce Levinasian ethics down to a variant of stakeholder management – but that a corporation is ready to go into an endless offering of itself for the sake of radical alterity. Can a corporation become an hostage of the Other? My answer to this question is no.

By legal definition, a corporation is turned on itself. It is legally bound by its charter to some place of business, purpose, objectives and goals, some charters even specifying what the corporation can and cannot do while pursuing these goals. A corporation is to start with a legal construction.

Corporations are of course more than legal constructions. Modern Leviathans (Chandler & Mazlish 2005), they are increasingly global (Medard and Bruner 2003) and with an encompassing economic power that challenges the supremacy of the State as the ruling institution (Korten 1995). One cannot either ignore their being multifaceted cultural phenomenon (Martin 2002). Corporations are sophisticated symbolic constructions, as epitomised by those who bring the contemporary worshipping of corporate names and logo (Klein 2000) as far as letting tattooing themselves with Nike’s Swoosh, Harley Davidson’s name or the Coke bottle (Bengtsson et al. 2005). It is strangely enough no longer strange Steve Ballmer, chief executive of Microsoft, yells an evangelizing “I Love This Company!” from the stage of a company meeting (see, e.g., Gandini 2003).

Corporations being place where humans (and non-humans) meet, nothing that is human is foreign to them, included irrationality and affectivity, magic and superstitions, power and submission, and more. Ignoring it would be inexcusable oversimplification. But equalling corporations with (super-)persons endowed with all qualities of humans, and may be even more, is equally contestable.

A corporation remains an abstraction turned on its own finality, i.e., the objectives that preside over its existence: offering products and services at a profit for the benefit of its stakeholders among which primarily its stockholders. Even more restrictively, as Milton Friedman (1970) eloquently stated it:

(T)here is one and only one social responsibility of business–to use it resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud.
The statement by economic theory that the purpose of a for-profit company is to make money for its owners might appear as self-referencing. It nevertheless effectively captures that corporations as institutions are by definition and purpose subdued to a rationality of ends and means – even if this is not true of all single aspects of corporate life.

Under such circumstances, the relationships that corporations entertain with the other (if one now assumes that a corporation can ‘entertain relationship’s with Something or Someone), either within or outside itself can only be conceived, defined and instrumentalised so as to serve a finality that is outside both the relationship itself or the other as it stands there. When Levinasian ethics enjoins us to approach the other with endless responsibility, love and readiness to sacrifice – the term corporation evokes plans, procedures, calculations and evaluations.

The main argument against the mere possibility of a Levinasian corporate ethics is however not that a corporation is purposeful social system oriented toward itself rather than the other. It is simply that a corporation is not a human\(^1\). A corporation has no body, no face, no voice but in a metaphorical sense. Its materiality is in this regard delusive. Corporate artefacts such as buildings, machines, products, signboards, logos, brochures or handbooks endow it with materiality. But they do not endow it with a body in the sense that the living is endowed with a body. The materiality of organisational artefacts is a materiality of things, not of life\(^2\). What apologists of such management fashions as organisational learning or corporate ethics may assume, a corporation is deprived of subjectivity. Deprived of subjectivity, a corporation cannot open itself toward the infinite otherness of the Other, deprived as it is from sensibility, consciousness or intentionality\(^3\). There is no phenomenology of the corporation.

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\(^1\) For a discussion of this issue from a Kantian perspective, see Stephen Wilmot (2001) *Corporate Moral Responsibility*

\(^2\) Eric Faý, personal communication.

\(^3\) Refusing to accept in a litteral sense any metaphorical understanding of corporate corporality, I hereby distanciate myself from John Roberts (2001, 2003) on the occasions when the latter, while recognising the corporeal character of Levinasian ethics, assumes the existing of a corporate body, even a corporate skin, and extends his reasoning on Levinasian sensibility to corporations to speak of ‘corporate sensibility’. I disagree on the same grounds with Assland (2004) when he claims that Levinas’ description of ethic as being ‘the-one-for-the-other’ is not dissimilar to the goal of a corporation of being ‘for the customer’. And I answer in a negative way as well to the question asked by Alain Etchegoyen (1990): ‘Do companies have a soul?’.
The greeting, the voice and the cuddling or sexuality and birth are examples of instances of encounter with the other that are beyond the reach of the corporation. Being unable to open itself without limit nor restraint to the otherness of the Other, the corporation is unable to feel any moral obligation toward this other in a Levinasian sense (regardless of whether it may or not be regarded as a moral subject for a legal version of moral responsibility).

Contemporary discourse on organisations may either anthropomorphise or objectify corporations, either to glorify or to demonise them, the corporation remains an abstraction, like the Nation, the right to property or Big Bang theory. Numerous staff or huge capital notwithstanding, a corporation is the product of men’s and women’s imaginary. It only exists because men and women choose to or are forced to believe in its reality as a juridical, economic or cultural link. A corporation comes to being exclusively through the men and women that populate, activate and narrate it so as to provide it with meaning and thereby existence.

Let me take the example of the very large company where my friend Eric P. works. This company only exists because of the will and ability of some people to convince us or to make us believe that it exists and their corresponding capacity to organise and translate their view into something that can be registered and called a corporation (in this resides the entrepreneur’s talent). You can visit its premises all over France, read its organisational chart, or skim through the interminable list of its transactions. You can even, under some conditions, asserts your rights for a share of the wealth it produces. On some occasions, although most often in a vague way, you will even be able to feel the presence of its specific culture. All this is however a matter of agreement only. The company can at any time change of legal status, move to new premises, be headed by new leaders, be given a new name and even change of activity. Some future government can consider it as illegal or useless and rule it out, its owners can choose to sell or to discontinue it, its patrons might turn their back to it and more.

The company where my friend Eric P. works does not exist in the same sense than my friend Eric P. exists. I can ear the sound of his voice, take his arm and let my reptile brain recognise the unique blend of his after-shave, bad breath and pipe tobacco smell. I can feel his presence in all my body. My friend is not a construction of the mind, even if our friendship is one. He is being.
When Emmanuel Levinas establishes ethics as the condition of the human, he also implicitly put ethics aside for humans (or more generally that which is conscious of the other and alive⁴). Levinas sets very strict conditions for an encounter with the other to be considered as ethics. So strict indeed that only living beings are likely to fulfil them. This rules out the mere possibility for a corporation to be an ethical subject. Along with those who oppose ethics altogether (Parker 1998) or who question whether a business ethics is at all possible – non-disruptive, calculative and legalistic a moralism as it is today – to start deconstructing it (Jones 2003), I critically claim that Levinasian ethics disqualifies altogether the mere possibility of imagining a corporate ethics.

Business ethics has become an industry (Hyatt 2005) and corporate ethics is doing well as a management technique⁵. Seminars, handbooks and articles spread in unison the message that corporations need to do good if they are to do well, promoting the business case for business ethics. Corporate ethics obviously thrives on the tail of accounting and industrial scandals such as Enron, Parmalat, Skandia or Vivendi. It has become fashionable to denounce the greed of (yesterday’s) directors and to advocate the need for clear and strict rules to rescue markets and capitalism from erring irresponsibility and boundless cupidity, as exemplified by the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 (Congress of the United States of America 2002) or the Swedish code for corporate governance (Kodgruppen 2004). The job market for ethics or compliance officers is booming and expected to remain so for a while.

A unrelenting question, however, is how ethical is corporate ethics? How much of an ethics is it and how much of a technique is it? Roberts (2001) denounces in it an ethics of narcissus: not a moral concern but a concern for better corporate appearances and self-presentation. Jones et al. (2005) argue likewise that current business ethics fails to deliver its promises: they find it seemingly compromised to its very core, resisting to the very things it advances and more generally below the expectations and demands of contemporary moral philosophy. My claim is that an even more radical critique can be formulated toward corporate

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⁴ This extension to encompass Bobby, the stray dog that reminded the Jewish prisoners of war belonging to the same work-commando than Emmanuel Levinas that they were still alive and human beings (Levinas 1963).

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ethics if one approaches moral philosophy according to Emmanuel Levinas, namely that it cannot at all be question of a corporate ethics. The rationale behind this statement is that if ethics is first philosophy, humans only can claim ethics and it then becomes impossible to speak of corporate ethics as corporate are non-humans. As a consequence, if one (still) wishes to speak of business ethics, it can only be question of managerial ethics.

3) Toward a Levinasian managerial ethics

Just like Levinasian ethics is critically distanced from classic ethical theory, would a managerial ethics of Levinasian inspiration need to be critically distanced from traditional ways of approaching managerial ethics, for example virtue ethics, deontology, egoism or utilitarism. These moral theories are namely caught in that which Levinas calls the egology of the ontological tradition. It makes little differences whether one elects some special virtues to cardinal managerial virtue, whether one compiles a set of rules for good conduct, whether one sets up procedures to satisfy one’s own interest or whether one designs some algorithm to assess the consequences of corporate action on its stakeholders. Virtues, rules, self-interest or principles are all products and expressions of values, judgmental categories, preferences or modes of understanding that are specific to whoever enounces them. As such, they merely express the ethical penchants of who proclaim them, hardly anything more.

This is why, Levinas keeps getting back to, morality is not a matter of character, sense of duty, own interest or sense for consequences but something that unfolds in our approach of otherness. A managerial ethics of Levinasian inspiration would instead take otherness as a starting point, consider relationships with the other as the locus of the ethical and work on unfolding the conditions of a boundless managerial responsibility toward alterity. As introduced above (Section 1: The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas), Levinasian ethics is an ethics of

5 As an indication, entering ‘corporate ethics’ at www.amazon.com on September 21, 2005 renders no less than 66839 references.

6 Emmanuel Levinas has in his writing touched upon commerce (Levinas 1961, p. 250 ff., see also Aasland 2004) but to my knowledge, he has never expressed himself on management. I therefore prefer to use here a tense that reminds that the reasoning presented here about a Levinasian managerial ethics is hypothetical. Correspondingly, business ethicists have only recently and only to a limited extent shown an interest in his moral philosophy. He is for example not at all mentioned in Blackwell’s Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Business Ethics (1997).
responsibility. Most important, it is, as Agata Zielinski (2004) emphasises, a responsibility *without why* in the sense that it is neither prompted by the subject herself nor sparked off by a third, but originates instead in the evasive absolute that is the alterity of the other. Levinasian responsibility is not a matter of being regarded as worthy of praise or blame for something that can be causally connected to one’s behaviour as knowledgeable and free moral agent (for an expose of this traditional definition see, e.g., Eshleman 2004). Instead of defining responsibility in terms of an attribution process affixed to a causal connection, Levinas defines responsibility as the providing of an answer (or more diffusely a response) to the infinite demand and command imposed on me, indeed constitutive of me, by the mere existing of the other and her call for existing, indeed a life in peace, as incarnated in the face that she turns on me. This call always comes first as questions always pre-exist answers which is why my responsibility is engaged before any acting or awareness of mine, indeed before anything else – ethics as first philosophy, again.

Levinasian responsibility is easier to describe than to implement, though. Certainly, a central characteristic of managerial work is to consist in a *faire-faire* (Hees 1999), approximately a do-to-get-done. Managers are functionally put in contact with others since being a manager consists in acting on others’ acting to get some special things done. Managers spend correspondingly most of their time interacting with others, either individually or in group, either face to face or in mediated ways (see, e.g. Tengblad, forthcoming). But these relations take place under social conditions that hardly enable them to shoulder a Levinasian responsibility. Their relationships to others are scripted and thus determined in form and content by considerations of hierarchies, interests, purposes and outcomes. Managers have to satisfy demands for rationality, creativity and performance (Corvellec 1997, Ehrenberg 1991, Le Goff 1995) – under permanent interference of power asymmetries, ad-hoc loyalties, unclear duties (Flamant 2002, Jackall 1988, Villette 1988). Suffering (Dejours 2000) and toxic emotions (Frost 2003) are part of their everyday. Their conduct is narrowly monitored, for example through contracts, so that they assume the status of entrepreneurial subjects of their own existence (Du Gay et al. 2005), but they are still and not free to act as they please. Their relationships to others is instrumentalised and commodified and they are thereby hindered from addressing
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the other with the selflessness and lack of reserve characteristic of Levinasian ethics. A convergence might be found between the relational character of managerial activity and the relational character of Levinasian ethics, but this convergence seems to stumble on these relations taking place in hierarchies and being controlled and finalised. The social conditions of managerial activities seem to both open and close themselves on Levinasian responsibility. How can this be dealt with?

There are at least three options: radical social change, bimoralism and weaker Levinasian program. The radical social change option is to suggest that since capitalism and/or modernity create inhuman social conditions for labour (see, e.g., Dejour 2000, de Villermé 1840, Linhart 1978, Weil 1951) and these conditions prevent managers from being ethical, one should then change the social conditions of capitalism and/or modernity so that managers can start to be ethical (see, e.g., Parker 2002). The bimoralism option is to consider that managers should or can only live according to different moral regimes as private persons and as professional (see e.g., Carr 1968, Hendry 2004); as a consequence, if a Levinasian ethics, it can then only be of a relevance in the private sphere and not in the professional one. The weaker Levinasian program option, finally, consists in abandoning the idea of an true Levinasian ethics for management (which would be a stronger Levinasian program) and in limiting one’s ambitions instead to an introduction of elements of Levinasian ethics into management whenever managerial discourse and practice offer holes, breaches or fractures likely to be filled with a radical concern for otherness.

My reason for choosing this third option are several and blend practical with theoretical and political concerns. I am for example concerned that the radical change option might in its utopia, as other utopias in the past, become a declaration good intentions in the name of which one replaces older forms of oppression with new ones. Likewise, besides that I am concerned by the potentially negative consequences for individuals of ceaselessly switching between two (or more) moral regimes, I am also frightened by the implicit acceptance in bimoralism that something as influential as management become a social locus with a moral of its own, i.e. potentially a moral non-place. This is why a weaker Levinasian program is favoured here. Why weaker? Because
regardless of its extreme intellectual stringency and high set standards, Levinasian ethics is the opposite of a moral *system* and that trying to turn it into a practical ethical totality would be contrary to its spirit. Levinasian ethics is akin to Levinasian understanding of infinity: an endless resistance to our practical understanding. Anything like a stronger Levinasian program would be therefore be a contradiction in terms. Why Levinasian? Because I am convinced that even without being constituted in a system, Levinasian ethics can introduce into management elements that prove to be beneficial not only to managers but mankind and life on Earth – that which I intend to illustrate in the reminding of this section.

As mentioned above, managerial ethics of Levinasian inspiration could only be an ethics of individual responsibility. Once corporate ethics discarded (see above Section 2: On the impossibility of a corporate ethics), responsibility stands for every manager exclusively as an individual matter. This responsibility would involve, simply because one is a manager, being ready to provide an answer, always a step ahead of formulated questions, without condition nor restriction and under paroles of openness or disinterest. Levinasian responsibility is tenseness and tautness, the combination of a relentless will, strive and strain directed toward the other: for a manager, being responsible or taking one’s responsibility or again acting responsibly points to putting oneself in the position of *offering* a response – in the various sense of ‘offering’ from making a proposal to presenting an act of worship through agreeing freely or staging a performance. Again, something easier to recommend than to implement when one takes into consideration the structural constraints characteristics of the managerial condition – hierarchies, interest, purposes and outcomes – but nevertheless something to be intensively aware of at every turn of a saying or acting when being a manager.

A managerial ethics of Levinasian inspiration could likewise only be local and contingent, i.e. modest. As Zigmunt Bauman (1993) observes, the ethics of Levinas implies the reject of an idea of universal moral norms. A Levinasian moral project, can thus only be local in the sense of being part of a here and now from which it cannot be disentangled. For a manager, this implies that each acting has to be approached in function of the specific traits of the situation at stake. This
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is not restating plainly the relativism of morality, in particular as opposed to the generality of ethics. It is instead highlighting that responsibility is a matter of refusal and avoidance of generalisation and a corresponding awareness of and adaptation to the specificity of any here and now since this specificity is constitutive of the alterity present in the relationship to the Other. Managers need to be warned against the risk that disembodying, typifying or generalising approaches of the other represent for otherness. Otherness is not an intellectual abstraction but a concrete reality – and reality is uniquely here and now. This is epitomised by the face-to-face: every face-to-face is unique as every face and every ‘to’ – the standing in front of the other in the face-to-face – is unique. Acknowledging the unique here and now concrete character of an encounter is not being relativistic; it is being aware that the occasional is the condition of our stumbling upon alterity. ‘Beware of generalisation’ (or for that matter: categorisation, typification, definition and the like) should stand on the pediment of all companies or the desk of all managers if we are to take seriously the demise of the (moral) grand narratives of modernity. Yet, how often does one hear the recommendation of adopting a local and contingent modesty in undergraduate, graduate or MBA programs?

Emphasising the local and contingent character of the encounter is emphasising the importance of proximity (although it might be better to speak of closeness to express that it is more than merely a matter of physical distance or even of propinquity to capture the idea that it is a combined nearness of purpose, blood, place and time). Levinas (1974) warns of the risks involved by distance when he tells of the importance of proximity. A highly relevant warning for us as a characteristic of management is just to be an acting at a distance (Robson 1992). The crux is that otherness cannot be experienced at a distance. Distance – literal or metaphorical – impedes one’s approach of alterity and favours instead egological practices such as generalisation, categorisation, typification or definition (again these); it should therefore be handled with care. Managerial means of remoteness, to put it bluntly, are to be considered as dangerous. From a Levinasian perspective, techniques that render the other faceless and speechless, are unethical and unfair (Introna 2003). Let managers mistrust tools and techniques that carry their words, decisions and acting afar as they neutralise the
face-to-face and increase their distance to other beings. This includes all practices that are anonymising, degrading or simply deprived of humanity. If the gaze is a uncompromising reminder of the injunction that ‘thy shall not kill’, one should be careful whenever one leaves its realm. Levinasian ethics advises us of the risks attached to all forms and means of farness as they tend to weaken our ability to open relationships with the other.

Dealing with the saying and the said, Levinas (1974) insists on the difference between the two. For him, the said belongs to ontology: it refers to the verb to be and in it resounds the being of entities, their true essence. The saying, on the contrary, is on the hither side of ontology and delves into the temporalisation of essence. Taking place prior to the said, to meaning and corresponding reduction, the saying is signifyingness antecedent to ontology. It is non-reducible to signs and communication and stands instead as an exposure and a proposition to set up a relationship to another. Saying is self-denuding in the sense that one discloses oneself in it. It stands for an effort and an orientation toward openness, proximity and responsibility. In Saying, one approaches the infinity of the Other. Managers should be aware of the difference between the saying and the said. As Paul Ricoeur (1997) reads him, Levinas places the said on the side of ontology and the saying on the side of ethics; this is a radical division that cleaves the correlation established by analytic philosophy of language between semantic of the enunciated and a pragmatic of enunciation. Saying is not to be reduced to a pre-said or any appendage subordinated to the said. Saying is instead the self-standing commitment of an approach, the one for the other or an utterance of the outside of being. Morality is in the saying, not in the said. So much for routine distribution of written mission statements or ethical policies to all employees: Levinasian managerial ethics would less insist on the content of these texts than on the conditions of their delivery. This would raise, in turn, loads of practical questions to be asked to managers, among which: How do you speak to your subordinates? How do you answer to questions? Do you communicate in a written form things that you could say orally? Would you be able to read loud all written texts in circulation in the organisation and if you cannot why is it so? It would likewise raise our awareness that written memos are potentially immoral means of distantiation or that anyone using email runs an ethical risk since it is a
form of communication that blends the written (said) and the oral (saying) in an unclear manner. That which Levinasian managerial ethics recommends is to prefer management by saying to management by said, partly to make it possible for managers to exert their ability to provide responses and partly to avoid that what managers say get separated from them and the circumstances of their saying, objectified into a said and imposed as such on the another. Such a recommendation is no less than a radical redefinition of corporate and interpersonal communication.

Speaking of communication, Levinas’ way of writing is in itself an illustration that developing a new ethics requires that one adopts not only a new way of writing but even a new vocabulary, verily a new language. One can assume that the same is true of developing a new managerial ethic: one needs to develop a new language to approach the other, one that leaves behind the linguistic limits and thinking habits of management as well as traditional ethics. Re-using the claim made by Teri Schearer about corporate accountability but to exclusively for managerial accountability (see footnote 3), I would say that “what is needed is an infusion into the language of economic accounts of a countervailing ethics that takes seriously the intersubjective obligation to the Other” (p.544, emphasis is mine) and “possesses the potential to inscribe a ‘radical accountability’ that is irreducible to those purposes that are the economic agent’s own” (p.566). Introducing new terms in managerial vocabulary could in this regard be a small but important practical step toward a Levinasian managerial ethics.

An example will illustrate how determinative is the choice of word. Speaking for example of vulnerability supposes not only that one questions the consequences of an act, an approach that would resume to classic consequentialism. It supposes even that one explores in the most cautious way the potential consequences of this act for the weakest among all of those who might be affected. Even more than this, it involves taking the place – at least mentally and at least for a while – of the one who receives the hardest hit. New questions come to mind: What if I pledge myself (i.e. my comfort, health, riches and power)

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7 On this account, I salute Ken McPhail’s (2001) aspiration for a reform accounting education and the accounting profession in the direction of a greater sense of moral sympathy for the other.
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for her suffering? What if I turn myself into her hostage? The vocabulary of vulnerability involves abandoning the strong perspective of the strong moral subject and adopting the weak perspective of the potential weak victim. It involves that one discards all sorts of reasoning in terms of averaged costs and benefits and imagine oneself instead, at the fullest of one’s emotions, in the skin of the worst –off individual in the worst case scenario.

And so on, term for term: entering Levinasian ethics is learning to use a new vocabulary and a new language. Radical, alterity and other are three key terms of this vocabulary that have been touched upon here above and so are the face, the gaze or the saying. There are many other terms in Levinas’ vocabulary, among which openness and listening, thoughtfulness and respect, guidance and servitude, or weakness and vulnerability. Those terms support an understanding that being in relationships with another (NB: a mere consequence of being a manager) involves endless moral responsibilities toward this other, in particular toward that which makes this other just an other. They make it possible to clarify the ethical dimension of one’s relationships with otherness, in its daily and concrete manifestations as well as in its most abstract theoretical elaborations, or to develop one’s disposition to actually take alterity into consideration, in particular in its radicalism. Levinasian ethics delivers a vocabulary that makes it possible to develop one’s sensitivity to and awareness of otherness – our responsibility is to start using it.

A critical term of this vocabulary that has not been mentioned yet is the third party (le tiers). The third party is the other of the other who stands in front of me. With the discovery of the third party, I am reminded that the other is never simply my other, and that there exists an infinity of others. The interpersonal relation I establish with the Other, I must also establish with other men; I owe everything to the other, but there is something else: a necessity to moderate the privilege that I grant the other (Levinas 1982, p.84). As Colin Davis (1996) puts it, the third party prevents my relationship with the other from becoming too cosily self-enclosed; the third party disturbs the intimacy of my relationship with the other and provokes me to question my place in the world and my responsibility toward society. My relationship toward the other, endless and unreciprocal as it is, is now doubled by my being an other for the third party. So,
Davis continues, the asymmetry of my responsibility for the other no longer means that I cannot expect respect and fair treatment. Proximity for the individual other opens then on justice in society where justice entails a community of others in which each is responsible for all. Justice is the extension of the principles of proximity, openness and responsibility to the third party, i.e. to all. I am not only near, open to and responsible for the other who is facing me. The same is true for all others. This is more than goal-oriented stakeholder management (Freeman 1983). It is a question of assuming an endless responsibility for goodness to serve justice, in short answering to a call of justice for all. Levinas hears such a call in French Rights of Man from 1789 and their promotion of goodness and responsibility for the other as means of eradicating completely the ultimate harshness of the Inhuman in being (Levinas 1991). To be more actual and global one could refer instead to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted and proclaimed in 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations and suggest, after Bert as van de Ven (2005), that these rights serve as guiding star for how managers interact with their stakeholders. “Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” is for example an hard to surpass start for an ethical policy.

Clive Barnett (2005) claims that the contribution of Emmanuel Lévinas to geography is to ask the questions of how far moral obligations actually extend and how to reconcile an ethics of care with an ethics of justice. The same could be said of the philosophers’ contribution to management studies and that finding practical ways to conciliate concerns of care for the proximate other with concerns of justice for all stands as managers’ first responsibility.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this article is to feature practical elements for a business ethics inspired of the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. The first section of the article consists in an overview of Levinasian ethics and philosophy that features how Levinas’ criticism of the ontological tradition leads him to proclaim ethics as first philosophy, his corresponding founding of ethics not in a sovereign moral subject but in one’s exposure to the other, with an insistence on the
phenomenology of the face or the gaze, and the endless individual responsibility that results from it. The second section presents a single idea, namely that although companies are approached as near-humans by some, they nevertheless remain purposeful non-humans instrumental systems that are closed on their own finality and as such deprived of the bodily subjectivity that is the condition of a Levinasian approach to the Other. The rationale is that if ethics is first philosophy, only humans can claim ethics, and organisations not being humans, one cannot speak of corporate ethics but only of managerial ethics. The third section, finally, outlines what a Levinasian managerial ethics could be. A range of issues and questions are risen and propositions are made on the basis of key features of Levinasian ethics such as responsibility, modesty, proximity or the difference between the saying and the said. Some are very direct such as ‘Beware of generalisation’ or ‘How do you speak to your subordinates?’. Others are more diffuse or encompassing such as the proposition made to enrich the vocabulary of management with terms such as offering, alterity or vulnerability since such terms can contribute to increase one’s exposure to the other. Yet others are formulated as general statements such as the conclusion that managing is accepting an endless responsibility toward the Other.

Levinasian ethics is ‘A Humanism of the Other’ (Levinas 1972). It is an ethics of responsibility, in particular an endless responsibility for justice. To be true to Emmanuel Levinas, one should say that this is not specific to managers. In a Levinasian sense, we all have an endless responsibility for justice for all (e.g. Levinas 1991). My point is yet that managerial activity exacerbates this responsibility as managing is an acting on other’s acting. As a faire-faire (Hees 1999), sorts of do-to-get-done, management is not only directed at the other but it incorporates this other in its process and reasons for being. Alterity is incorporated in the most intimate stuff of management. As a consequence, everyone has an endless responsibility for the other, but if one chooses or accepts to be a manager, one should be aware that a profession which is an acting on acting involves that, on the top of one’s general responsibility as human, one moreover accepts an endless responsibility toward justice as a professional responsibility. Being aware of the other; making her part of one’s intentionality; exposing oneself to her alterity; answering to the demand, which is an order, of
her face and her gaze; providing an answer, to all, at every moment, without limit nor restriction, a step ahead of any question: such is the demanding agenda sets by Levinasian ethics. Managers need to compose with it within the limit of what is humanly and socially possible – at best so to say – the practical challenge of a Levinasian managerial ethics residing in phasing this agenda into actual managerial practices, for example using the questions or terms discussed above to create interstices in decision processes that are open on managerial responsibility toward the other.

As mentioned above, managers do already live under numerous social constraints among which hierarchies, interest, purposes and outcomes. That which Levinasian ethics does is to add to this list of constraints an endless responsibility for the Other. Not because some economic theory says that it has to be so (most economists would for that matter probably argue against such a view on managerial responsibility); not either because there is a business case for it and that it would make good economic sense; but because managers are human beings interacting with other human beings, and that the alternative to not be human is actually not an alternative if capitalism is not to be regarded, some day in the future, as another avatar of modern barbarity with every manager having retroactively to say “Yes, I know, I have been consciously complaisant of it all the time”.

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