

ETHICS AND DISEMPOWERMENT

revisiting ethics, power, and oppression with Emmanuel Lévinas

William Timmerman
Honors Symposium 2014



\$100 REWARD

WILL be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl **HARRIET**. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North.

The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States.

All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.

JAMES NORCOM.

Edenton, N. C. June 20

W221W

HARRIET JACOBS (1813 – 1897)



HARRIET JACOBS

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

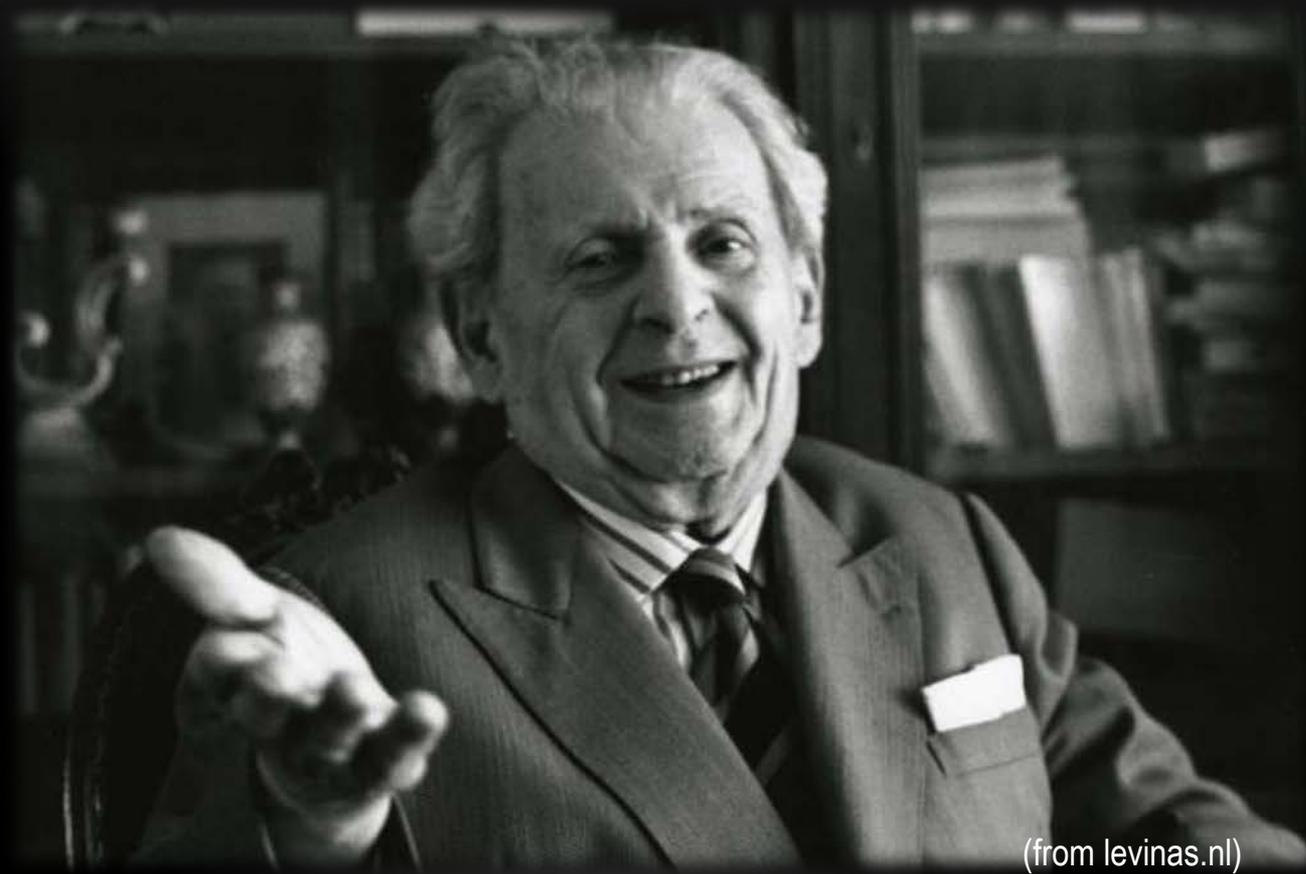


THE PROBLEM OF POWER

- "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
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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
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OUTCOME

- Ethics becomes a way of life not rules
 - Disempowerment is not exceptional
 - Ethics co-exists within power relations
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We are the justice for the oppressed



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