

Avatar! Educating for Responsibility to Live Well With Each Other and the Earth

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Introduction: Responsibility and Interdependence

Responsibility is the source of community; it has promise as an ethics for the re-foundation of society. It is about my relationship with you, my neighbor, and about my obligations to the wider community of life. It takes on a more urgent imperative for facing systems of exploitation and living beyond earth's renewable capacity. Here responsibility becomes a restraining ethic, with a limitation placed on freedom to exploit people and resources with liability for social and environmental harm.

The moral, accountable and legal dimensions of responsibility open possibilities for education: for the shaping of personhood, for knowledge, and for the structuring of education to support the social dimension of common good.

This paper sheds some light on responsibility as a relational guide to living well with each other and the earth. It offers ways to repair systems of separation and exploitation, and how these may work in education. The big question is how to achieve relational ethics and solidarity in the context of the irresponsible dimensions of liberal thought and its deeply embedded social forms which give expression to its premises globally? The symptomatic premises I refer to philosophically are its systems of separation and objectification; in social and economic terms these translate into inequality and environmental injustice which are both produced from a transactional economy in which poverty and environmental resource use are excluded as externalities. How to give expression to integrative relational ethics and responsibility in our social systems, and in particular in law and education? Could responsibility serve as an acupuncture point for remedying an allergic system?

Thinking through a western lens of ethics and philosophy, responsibility for safeguarding the conditions of life for future generations came into focus through Hans Jonas (1986) who saw that technology extended humanity's capacity for altering the natural order with unforeseeable consequences. He extended the concept of responsibility beyond a means of accountability for past actions, such as reparation for environmental damage, to take account of the future of life on earth. We are challenged to act in ways "compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on earth" (Jonas, 1986, p. 11).

Writing at a similar time, Emmanuel Levinas also a Jewish philosopher, saw in responsibility a hope to ensure that humanity would never again succumb to the depravity of the Holocaust. Responsibility, for Levinas is the preconscious condition of human life, and the basis of an inescapable relational ethic sourced in the call of the other upon our lives.

The values this paper considers are for a world view with humans as interdependent and as part of nature. This may be apparent to many of you – it is apparent in many cultures and philosophies such as the Malay philosophy of *Sejahtera*, Gandhian *ahimsa*, and *Kaupapa Māori* in Aotearoa New Zealand. Interdependence is increasingly appreciated amongst those seeking sustainable living in the age of the Anthropocene. Interdependence is an abstract way of saying that everything is inter-related, and in an ecological world view it works at every scale, small and large. The negative side can be seen in the aggregated effect of us driving petrol cars in New Zealand, Malaysia and elsewhere is connected to the dying of coral reefs in the Pacific.

Climate Change Context

For the past 10,000 years, the period of the Holocene, life has been sustained in the narrow band of about 2 degrees of temperature variation as understood in earth systems science (Steffan et.al. 2015). This stable climate systems has provided the conditions of human development and settlement. Already we have crossed the threshold of stability with just over 1 degree of warming since 1850. As science opens our understanding of human impact on planetary ecosystems, we are compelled to take account of human ethics as part of the sustainability agenda, as expressed the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals. Goal Thirteen enjoin us to urgent action on climate change.

The recent IPCC 1.5 degrees report has a clear narrative of the multidimension and interspecies effects of Green House Gases induced atmospheric warming on pollination, the habitats and location of species, variations in growth, effects on life cycles of plants and animals and how changing systems of growth and supply of food affect access and equity for people (IPCC 1.5 2018, p. 1-30).

These generic categories took on a more local reality in a discussion with a Māori group when they said we think about climate change and the condition of freshwater by signs of change where we live and go fishing. They are noticing changes in the time when the toheroa (shell fish delicacy) are ready to eat, and observe changes in their abundance and size? We spoke of freshwater the effect of native trees being replaced by commercial pine forest plantations alongside rivers. An elder asked ‘have you ever seen a beetle on a pine tree?’ (Te Rangiita 2017) He was referring to beetles which live in native trees as food for fish and effects on fish from of altering their habitats.

Climate change is evidence of unaccounted for consequences of exploitation i environmental resources. The externalizing of nature is an ethical fault in the capitalist economy; precautionary decision-making is one form of mitigation against unforeseen consequences. The real issue is to address the system which allows for externalities and shift the paradigm to achieve integration – and develop an understanding of humans as part of nature and now, in the age of the Antropocene, as capable of altering the stability of the planet.

The recent IPCC report (2018) states:

Climate change represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet (IPCC 1.5, p. 1-43)

Shouldn’t we say:

Human societies represent an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to Climate change and to the planet?

The reality is that not all human societies are a threat to the planet, but those which are, the industrial societies – both well embedded developed and developing societies are affecting all societies, most notably Pacific Islands. This is a moment therefore to mention responsibility in relation to climate change and the Paris Agreement.

When we look into the history of western societies we find many of the attributes of responsibility, duty and public good were present before the industrial revolution. One of the researchers for our book *ResponsAbility* discovered that duty and public good were assumptions of the early liberal political thinkers such as John Locke (*Two Treatises of Government*, 1689) and Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651); they assumed that human wellbeing was inherent in the social contract and argued for rights as an assurance against oppression. Later Adam Smith, in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) even foresaw the exploitative capacity of corporations that functioned beyond the legal reach of their own state to plunder elsewhere for their own gain (Morgan, 2019).

Protective rights to life and property were intended to be safeguards against abusive power of the state, and were a means to modify the exploitative impetus of governments or corporates.

We can see that rights were introduced to address the negative effects of industrial growth despite the benefits of economic enterprise. Private property, limitations on liability, freedoms, and the growth of corporate entities favoured economic expansion supported by the concept of the autonomous, rational individual. Rights are needed to mitigate the dehumanizing and exploitative effects of a system that externalizes the negative consequences of expansion.

Pope Francis draws together these complexities in a simple and elegant statement referring to the planetary emergency as follows:

It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day...We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental....to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

Responsibility is a response to the cry of the earth and of the poor.

Finding Compass Points for Ethics and Responsibility

This section takes a step into the realm of ethics for enhancing the relational qualities of human persons with an added reference to responsibility. It is an ethics that seeks to move beyond the illusion of the autonomous individual and the dualisms of humans and nature, knowledge and experience, mind and body, spirit and matter by acknowledging the radical difference of the Other. Responsibility concerns the formation of human subjectivity – which is at the heart of education and I will touch on how such an ethics becomes relevant to education and social practice more broadly.

Calame?

The understanding of ethics as relational, accountable and other-centred has been inspired by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his quest for an alternative to the violence within the dualistic self/other subject/object system (Levinas 1969, 1987, 1996). The capacities and potential of our relational condition are suppressed by the individual notions of the self in liberal world views and values. Levinas takes the motif of the face-to-face relation as the ground for the relational self to say that in this relation I am exposed to the call of the other and am obliged to respond.

Responsability, as the ability and the requirement to respond, is at the heart of an ethics which is a radical departure from objectifying the other in the self-other relation. Remarkably Levinas places ethics of inescapable obligation as preeminent for philosophy.

At the level of the human person cultivated in the values of self-interest, agency and freedom responsibility introduces a restraint on freedom. Taken further it exposes us, or me, as vulnerable to another. If responsibility invites me to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor I am exposed to seeing that I am part of another, and bound to them in a way that obliges me to respond. In a radical departure from mastery, this is a subjectivity of vulnerability to the face of another person which exposes the relational condition of human life. This is an ethics that does not allow me to be deaf to the need of my neighbour and the stranger and it calls for practical, material response to the need of another. It may be expressed simply in the offer of water to one who is thirsty, or in response to any situation of precariousness.

The human person is relational prior to consciousness, to formation of the ego and to rationality. Life is created and nurtured relationally; life is born of male and female parents, and the prenatal symbiotic bond becomes, after birth, a relation of growing into mutual recognition. This is intended to express a mode of encountering the Other person in their uniqueness, not as the other of me (the dualistic mode of identity formation). Objectifying the other can take many forms - reducing their value, assimilating them, not recognising their 'difference'. To meet another through a non-assimilative recognition of their absolute difference, or alterity, is to appreciate that they cannot be fully known; so ethics is not a matter of finding common ground – but of giving space for alterity.

'My' identity does not come from self-assertion or self-fulfillment, rather from the fulfilment of responsibility. It is a relation which does not assume to know the Other, allowing for aspects of the other person which are beyond my consciousness, beyond my frame of reference, and is therefore expressed in a willingness to be taught, to listen, to respond (Zhao 2016). The other is not to be assumed to be knowable. The mode of the relation with the other in their alterity is a learning and teaching relation; although knowing is expanded the other is never captured – it is always strange in terms of an infinite unknowability of the other.

The motif of the stranger is not only to signify one who comes by surprise, it is one who can never be fully known.

It is therefore to receive the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the other, or conversation, is a nonallergic relation, an ethical relation: but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching relation. Teaching is not reduceable to

maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I can contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced (Levinas 1969:51).

Maieutics is a method of drawing knowledge from existing experience, and expanding upon it. Without attempting to decipher the language in this quotation, the intention here is to locate the quest for knowing in infinite unknowability to ensure against the grasp of knowledge and mastery by opening the horizon of infinite responsibility. Levinas opens a remarkable and difficult demand of responsibility by subverting the ontology of mastery with radical new ground of human identity and subjectivity formed by surrendering to the Other.

As I reflect on responsibility in practice, where difference, in the sense of ‘alterity’ allows for a learning relation it is easy to remove the potency of the idea of ‘kneeling before the Other’. It loses the oeuvre of a different source of subjectivity where ‘my’ responsibility becomes the first question of ethics. We see the direction of Levinas’s thought in welcome that resists assimilation, and in understanding that freedom, or autonomy stands in the way of responsibility:

Can the Same welcome the Other, not by giving itself to the Other as a theme, (that is to say as being) but by putting itself in question? (Levinas 1996, p. 16)

The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself of my freedom as a constituted wilful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am (Levinas 2009, p. 112).

The ethics of responsibility elicited by ‘face’ at the personal level is the basis for responsibility in the social arena -in systems of thought, policy and practice in education. The metaphor is intended to be phenomenal and it at the same time it is beyond representation or definition because it refers to any other in the system of othering. The river also has a face and calls in a way that pushes us to hear its intelligence. This move away from anthropocentrism to a new attunement to nature may not sound quite so esoteric when I let you know that in New Zealand we have vested the Whanganui River as a legal person – so we expect to hear the voice of the river, Te Awa Tupua make its voice heard, and in listening and being taught, responsibility will emerge. Ethics means to take action, to commit, to be engaged. Levinas again:

The original themes of philosophy [proceed] from giving radical attention to the urgent preoccupations of the moment...To think is no longer to contemplate but to commit oneself, to be engulfed by that which one thinks, to be involved. This is the dramatic event of being-in-the-world (Levinas 1996 pp. 3-4).

Fulfilling such an ethical demand may not be possible all the time, in everyday reality, but our

‘exposure’ to the other conveys a primary relational orientation which is relevant to thinking about education. This is where advocacy for justice involves the disruptive interpolation of the ‘prophetic’ voice (Martin, 2016).

Levinas himself resisted interpreting an ethics of responsibility for institutional or sectoral purposes – referring to lay the groundwork for a new notion of the subject and of ethics as the ground for social organization. Responsibility itself is an ethic that resists codification because of the call of responsibility is beyond the law, or beyond prescription. It is work that cannot be compensated because it is beyond calculation (Biesta 2016). Like love, responsibility can be espoused, enacted, celebrated, and its loss lamented but our sensitivity to the other, especially to another in need, who is destitute in any way, compels us to respond. Even our inability or failure to respond cannot fully dispel the interpolation of the other.

In reality the aspiration for relational values and responsibility are sought in contested situations with contradictions and power dynamics. Asymmetries of power are always present and deterrents and sanctions against exploitation will be necessary.

Yet an ethics of responsibility does demand to be institutionalized in every sphere of which law and education are specific examples (Martin 2016). It is utopian to rely on an ethical imperative alone without the coercive sanctions of law to giving effect to accountabilities for achieving equity and redress for social and environmental harms. The face-to-face relation, as the ground of or source of societal practice can be developed as a primary transformative relational quality of other-centredness.

Some References for Responsibility in Education

Malaysia – considerations for Islam and national education

Reading some of Rosnani Hashim’s papers on Malaysian education I began to consider how the interest in greater cohesion between Islamic education and national education could be addressed by seeing these face-face. There may be an assumption that the pathway to integration between the national system which has a legacy in colonial liberal values and Islam education sourced in the teaching sourced in the Qur’an can be achieved where the weight is on commonalities. In principle the ethical orientation is one of appreciation for the different histories, spirituality, knowledge and even moral obligations within and between these streams.

In Chapter 8 of *Educational Dualism in Malaysia* Hasham sees congruence between revealed knowledge of the Qur’an and provision for teaching other faiths in Malaysia schools/education Where would it lead to view the teaching of the Qur’an on revealed knowledge as a site of alterity (Rosnani Hashim 2018)?

There are several possible lines of thought for the questions of different cultural and religious streams in Malaysia and the interest in strengthening national bonds. Achieving coherence in support of Malaysian national unity could be thought of otherwise than through commonalities – through an ethics of responsibility. One of the drawbacks of basing unity on communality comes from communalism as an endeavour to guard against those outside (Biesta, 2018), Zhao 2018). Seeking cohesion from common ground means does not overcome a system which marginalized others, and excludes those positioned as outside or different.

Exploring an ethics of responsibility would bring an orientation of the unknowability of the other, and it invites a face-to-face encounter with listening as the first mode and gesture of being willing to be taught.

Face-to-face with the cultural and religious other as unknowable is to step into a profound vulnerability – or risk, because this path takes us towards creating bonds based on responsibility to the other. If responsibility is the source of sociality, rather than commonality, there are puzzling questions of how to work in this mode, where this will lead, how to express this in practical ways – and in policy.

Such ethical work must be, for a start, procedural. I can only assume it might start with a dialogic process in which differences are made explicit and this requires awareness of existing secular, religious, historical, political and ideological identities and beliefs are held (one's own assumptions and beliefs is not always readily known). Starting with our own consciousness and with an sharing of different ontologies in the mode of willingness to be taught would allow for all differences to be discovered and open a pathways towards inclusive education created through responsibility. The willingness to be taught, if we chose to be immersed in an ethics of responsibility and responsibility would not mean willing to be taught to become better knowers, or a subject whose comprehension and consciousness is expanded; nor would it mean maintaining an attitude of humility before the other. Our receptivity to what is given (as teaching) is an interpolation that awakens responsibility, and requires a response.

Practicing an ethics of responsibility may be quite simple – it is just a radical departure from seeking common ground by guarding against difference, and by focussing on knowledge, knowledge of each other and on harmony. The willingness to be taught is accompanied by the question of how can I express my responsibility to you? What can I, as a Malay of Islamic faith do to extend the opportunities for you as a Chinese Malaysian to study art or learn Arabic? Practices of listening and of responsibility, face-to-face between two, in the classroom, at intentional policy roundtables to find their way into frameworks for education will be oriented to knowledge making through facing others.

The place of humility is not to become an obedient servant but to create justice. It is born of deep attention to relational processes which might challenge normative protocols for meeting with the expectation of outcomes and goals. It suggests courageous ventures into the territory of difference to unsettle habits of seeking harmony which guard against disruptive learning and questioning; furthermore it replaces the objectification of the other and offers a form of justice that is more than a better place in the system of exclusions. Radical inclusion is a prospect that comes from facing the other. In other words, this is not to improve the liberal project by humanizing or re-earthing it (which could be the case of education for sustainable development). Rather it could be an acupunctural interpolation to tilt the system away from the illusion of freedom towards *responsibility*.

In New Zealand we have a similar opportunity between the state schools and Māori language kura (schools). The curriculum framework covers both, although *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* is a specific framework for Māori medium education. This has come about to repair the near demise of Te Reo Māori (Māori language) through colonial education policies; it offers cultural recovery with opportunities for students to succeed and fulfil their potential. While these are separate pathways strenuously fought for with persistent advocacy for Māori interests, there has been no platform for engaging face-to-face in the radical sense of being willing to be taught and to respond with responsibility. The case for justice has been forged through the Waitangi tribunal on the basis of grievance for the demise of the Te Reo Māori and the rights under the Treaty of Waitangi¹.

A face-to-face pathway may yield a far more robust form of justice emanating from listening to an interpolation from Māori (as opposed to superficial consultation that is the norm). A reciprocal process of willing to be taught from non-Māori seems intuitively less ethical because of the dominant position of western New Zealanders, yet the very impetus of facing with responsibility is precisely to undo mastery with ethics. Listening and allowing questions for responsibility is to break with the freedom that is intrinsic to dominance and deepen justice; inclusiveness could replace marginalization not only of Māori, but on all sides, and responsibility could restore Māori authority expressed in the exercise of responsibility. This is not to advocate for integration as justice; rather it could lead to pathways to support plurality and to continue to realize the aspirations of Māori.

Relational Wellbeing - Aotearoa New Zealand

An epistemological adventure is needed to give expression to responsibility in education. This is work for further practice and another paper. However I will mention a policy initiative in

¹ Treaty of Waitangi. Signed in 1840 between Māori rangatira (those with chiefly authority) and the British Crown. An agreement in which the continuance of Māori governance and property were guaranteed and in which British governance over British settlers was approved.

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New Zealand on relational wellbeing – in the particular area of child wellbeing. I will not stop for detail on New Zealand policy except to say we have very high rates of child poverty and inequality, and if I may include this, we also have an crisis of fresh water – both its quality and distribution; both are attributed to the neoliberal policies of the last thirty years.

The welcome new direction at address poverty and climate change is being led across government, and in particular through the Living Standards Framework based on social, financial, natural capital and personal well-beings. On the Trade Union side, labour policies and climate change are being negotiated through a framework of Just Transitions. This is a great departure from the prior tight narrow focus on fiscal responsibility. While new policy is moving on apace, discerning analysts see that the continuity with liberal values, including individualism and the orientation to economic growth and development. For all the beneficial reorientation of policy under way these underlying premises persist. We are in fact mapping plans for inclusive and remedial policy onto the system which produced its divisions (as externalities). Can externalities of environment and social marginalization be integrated?

Professors Amanda Wolfe and Jonathan Boston at Victoria University, Wellington are currently convening a series of think tank round tables with policy leaders (including with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet) to identify the premises of relational wellbeing, and to consider how relational wellbeing can be measured. It has been a challenge even to identify relational values and systems – such as the relational basis for teaching language, family holidays, offering hospitality, sharing (rather than owning) wealth – which is much more a norm in Pacific cultures.

This endeavour to identify values outside the liberal norms and give expression to responsibility is a real policy inquiry. For now, some of the starting points to discover ways in which freedom and choice and self-interest are entrenched in education, would be to critically examine any religious, geography, history, English, management or legal text by asking the kinds of questions that expose irresponsibility and privilege given to these values. A teacher might ask: what are the power dynamics and who or what is excluded? How is earth represented? What obligations are enacted or waived in a text? How are human relationships with nature recognized and expressed? And, more pertinently for our relational interests, how can we exercise responsibility here? And there is always the question ‘who do we listen to, and learn from?’ and how do we respond?

Beyond the borders of education

Relational ethics is a reference for taking education outside of the borders of ‘schooling’. The enclosure of the classroom or lecture room takes us to the realm of initiatives for learning in communities and to encountering differently conceived learning and teaching. The

collaborative impetus of education for sustainable development and the global reference for Global Citizenship Education are two examples where learning ‘from the Other’ could break with the idea of accruing knowledge and of capturing knowledge within the grasp of the knowing, rational subject. Collaborating with communities, and engaging with business, local government, government agencies, civil society organizations opens the school gates to learning from communities and to sharing responsibility for community life with them.

However education for sustainable development is inclined towards enriching mainstream development agendas and has not had sufficient philosophical depth to avert it from repeating forms of exclusion and colonization (Martin and Morrison 2016a). This may come from a generic global framework that risks becoming programmatic despite its espousal of being grounded in specific local contexts. There seems to be no substitute for learning and education that is earth related and spiritually referenced such as the *Sejahtera* philosophy and in *Kura Kaupapa Māori* (Razak 2018, Hoskins and Jones 2017). There is a point of discussion with Dato Dulfliki Razal that working with *Sejahtera* to decolonize education may not so much to transcend differences but to ground them in obligation to the other.

In reality this brings new approaches on many levels. It brings forward a pre-eminent value of relationship capabilities in a context of encountering unfamiliar knowledge and expertise in a process that is likely to challenge the held positions of expertise. Recognition of this as an experience of encountering the other - the other as different knowledge, the other as my teacher, invites us to consider the value of a learning position and a willingness to be taught in interdisciplinary encounters. Centrally a face-to-face process is a pathway beyond an enclosed system with the potential to achieve inclusion through the difference of another rather than through commonality.

In the context of societies where indigenous peoples are marginalized, the participation of Indigenous Peoples and those with traditional local knowledge is not only about ethical protocols for consultation and informed consent, nor only to ensure inclusion. Indigenous participation has the potential to strengthen relational capabilities – in the conditions of willingness to learn – because of the ontologies of kinship and traditions of responsibility for living well with the earth (Hoskins 2010; Durie, Joseph et al 2017; Te Aho 2019). Māori and other indigenous cultures privilege face-to-face encounter mediated through obligation and hospitality (Hoskins, Martin, Humphries 2011). In traditional settings the protocols for meeting face-to-face are practices where the asymmetries of host and guest, men and women, different agenda and interests are drawn together in conditions for learning and engagement through the offering of hospitality. While this is not developed further in this paper it is irresistible to draw analogies with the ethics of responsibility being explored here.

Inclusion means the involvement of those with legacies of exclusion and marginalization, including from slavery, forced migration, and colonization. I cannot leave these exclusions as only human exclusions; climate change and its multidimensional impacts including on water and the atmosphere is symptomatic of the same externalizing mechanisms which are given effect by the priorities of the transactional economy (Martin, 2018, Viñuales 2019).

Embracing an orientation of responsibility to engage with complex systems invites all the resourcefulness of relationship building with an attitude of learning, willingness to be taught, trust and accountability. Ethical epistemology may be less driven by the power and conquest of knowledge than by allowing for the unknowable. A certain humility opens the possibility of leaving the false consciousness of mastery and comprehending that we are co-creators in a living ecosystem in which our destiny is ultimately shared with all forms of life.

There is always capability for responsibility at some level although this may vary according to capacity and resources. It may be as simple as joining with others to expose irresponsibility and bring practices of responsibility into the everyday prophetic work of renewing societal systems and creating policies which ensure practices of responsibility. *Sejahtera* and *Kaupapa Māori* and an ethics of responsibility give us streams of reference for decolonizing classroom practice and teaching and learning frameworks.

Conclusion

This paper traverses an ambitious range of references in order to explain the significance of responsibility as a profoundly different orientation for ethics as a practice of life.

Education which cultivates the relational self, responsive to the other, and to wider social and environmental wellbeing, paves the way for social order of justice and an expanded view of humans as interdependent with nature. A likelihood that responsibility can be curative comes from introducing a different energy flow into a divisive system; it is a kind of re-earthing and relating to that which is different face-to-face.

While there is a shift towards an orientation of responsibility as an ethics to address the multiple aspects of the Anthropocene, responsibility is rarely grappled with on the basis of a paradigm shift at the level of personhood. Since we humans collectively are compelled to account for our impact on the planet and for our place in the common home of earth's ecosystems we are invited into a new relational dialogue with each other and our earthly kin.

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