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**Ethical Theory
and Responsibility
Ethics**

A Metaethical Study
of Niebuhr and Levinas



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Introduction

This book seeks to provide a metaethical analysis of the responsibility ethics of two of its prominent defenders: H. Richard Niebuhr and Emmanuel Levinas. In any ethical writings, some use of philosophical concepts and ideas is inevitable, whether it is done consciously or unconsciously. Various moral thinkers use philosophy to explain and justify their ethical positions as well as to critique others'. This is the case in responsibility ethics as well. Many thinkers who emphasize the primacy of responsibility in ethics have often made use of philosophy in a variety of ways, though their particular uses have not always been a focal point in religious ethics. This present study seeks to bring some extra clarity to the ethics of the two thinkers by examining the plausibility and coherence of their philosophical ideas and positions in order to advance current scholarship in responsibility ethics. A thorough evaluation of philosophical views, especially with respect to ethical theory, may help strengthen the argument for responsibility ethics, by exposing and clarifying some conceptual difficulties and logical inconsistencies in the theoretical framework of one's ethics, and thereby further improving particular arguments for responsibility ethics.

Generally speaking, responsibility ethics differs from other ethics in that it begins with a moral conviction that responsibility is not an option but an imperative, given the moral crises that threaten the well-being of human beings and their natural world. The emergence of responsibility ethics in the contemporary world is not unrelated to the rapid extension of human power and the harmful effects of instrumental rationality in the (post)modern era. Coupled with a dramatic extension of human power, instrumental rationality has shown itself capable of creating devastating consequences for human beings and many other life-forms on earth that have become much more visible and palpable to many people. The wider application of science and technology, which are supposed to make human life safer and easier, has often become a matter of grave moral concern with far-reaching consequences, from deadly weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to global warming to oil spills, both present and future. As Hans Jonas points out, modern technology has enhanced human power to a degree that human beings can now fundamentally alter the realm of nature, including that of human nature, the effects of which can be both deadly and irrevocable for many

life forms on earth.¹ In this regard, responsibility ethics soberly recognizes the gravity of this moral situation and seeks to be a guide for the morally perplexed to navigate tough ethical issues. Responsibility ethics thus takes moral knowledge and moral agency seriously. We humans are moral agents who have the capacity to act on the basis of reflection. We do not merely act, but rather we can choose to act through deliberation and determination. The word “choice” here implies our ability to perceive *values* and discriminate among them in our ethical reasoning. Because of the deliberate nature of our choices, we are held accountable for our actions when others ask us to explain and justify our reasons for them.

Now let me point out some major features of this book. First, it is a *comparative* work in responsibility ethics. As a comparative study in the ethics of responsibility, its main focus is to illumine the relationship between responsibility and ethical theory by building upon the ideas and insights of two contemporary thinkers, viz., Niebuhr and Levinas. Although there have been many works on each thinker in religious and philosophical ethics, they tend to focus on the exposition or interpretation of each thinker’s religious and ethical thought. In contrast, this study shall make a sustained effort to bring their ethics under the microscope of contemporary analytic moral philosophy to shed light on the place of ethical theory in responsibility ethics.

Second, this is also a study in *religious* ethics, with the purpose of contributing to the moral life of a particular religious community and beyond. However, unlike some religious ethicists who conceive religious ethics to be an *intramural* intellectual activity within a particular religious tradition, I take the view that religious ethics is inherently an *intermural* intellectual activity that critically examines the moral beliefs and practices of a particular religious community in light of broader human experience. On this account, an important task of religious ethics then is to be able to *justify* the moral beliefs of a particular religious tradition or community to show that the beliefs are both true and worthy of believing. The point is not only to help make religious traditions publicly intelligible so that many outside the traditions can also benefit from the moral insights of the traditions but also to help hold the traditional accountable for their beliefs. In an era in which religious beliefs often serve as sources of moral solidarity and violence, religious ethicists have public responsibility to clarify and, if necessary, critique certain religious moral beliefs.

Now let me say a few words about why I want to engage with the ethics of Levinas and Niebuhr for this study. First, Levinas and Niebuhr are two of the most outspoken advocates of responsibility ethics in the contemporary world.

1 Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1-10.

They both understand ethics primarily in terms of responsibility, as they share the conviction that responsibility is not just a function of ethics but that it ought to be a central concern of ethics. All this is hardly surprising when we understand their social contexts. Both Levinas and Niebuhr experienced firsthand the graphic reality of destructive human power in the first half of the twentieth century and sought to find an ethical solution to it. They witnessed the development of weapons of mass destruction and the indiscriminate use of these weapons against innocent human beings as well as the unspeakable human suffering that resulted from it. For these thinkers, the signs of the times are unmistakably clear: human power must be subject to ethical interrogation, and responsibility is no longer a personal moral virtue but an imperative for all.

At a theoretical level, these two thinkers find the *locus* of responsibility in the encounter between the self and “the Other.” Their ethical proposals may be classified as instances of what William Schweiker calls dialogical theories of responsibility. These theories differ from other theories of responsibility such as agential and social theories. According to Schweiker, agential theories “focus moral analysis on the relation of the agent to himself or herself” and “specify the grounds for validly relating causal and evaluative judgments with respect to the capacity of the agent to act morally”, while social theories of responsibility “focus on social roles, vocations, stations, and thus communal unity.”² In contrast, dialogical theories of responsibility “focus moral attention on the event of encounter and thus a relational account of the human being.”³ In this respect, it will be worth exploring why these two contemporary thinkers, who write on responsibility, look at the dialogical structure of human existence in addressing contemporary ethical issues.

Furthermore, both Niebuhr and Levinas hold the belief that human experience, religious or not, is an important source of ethics. In his various writings, Niebuhr makes it clear that the primary object of Christian moral reflection is human moral life, not the Christian life, and that Christian ethics should draw upon non-Christian sources that may aid Christian moral reflection. In comparison, Levinas’s philosophy takes a form of phenomenology, according to which the direct apprehension of ethical meaning is possible in one’s encounter with the Other. In this regard, these two thinkers agree on the importance of dialogical human experience in ethics and refuse to confine religious ethics to distinctively religious sources.

2 William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 85-86.

3 Ibid., 102.

The main purpose of this study is twofold: to provide an ethical analysis of the ethical thought of Niebuhr and Levinas with the help of contemporary analytic moral philosophy in order to make each of their ethics more plausible and coherent, and to make some positive contribution to responsibility ethics so that others might draw upon the ideas presented here. This study, however, faces two major challenges. One is that each thinker develops his own ethics out of many sources that are not always philosophical in their language and builds an argument that is not strictly philosophical. The other is that both thinkers do not exactly use the kind of philosophical language, i.e., the language of contemporary analytic moral philosophy, that is going to be the main philosophical lens in this work. Thus, there is a danger that my analytic approach to their ethics may seem reductionist, overlooking their historical, theological, and other philosophical roots.

This is why this study is intentionally interdisciplinary and inclusive, even though its main lens is that of analytic moral philosophy. Part of my task is to show that my analytical reading of the ethics of Niebuhr and Levinas is still relevant even after considering other important elements of their ethics. It also needs to be said at the outset, however, that an analytic approach to the two thinkers' ethics is not meant to undercut the importance of other approaches. Analytic moral philosophy is primarily concerned with the conceptual clarification and logical plausibility of ethical concepts and ideas. As such, the concepts, categories, and theories discussed in analytic moral philosophy do not necessarily discriminate the sources or the style of one's ethics. Nor is this present study an attempt to reduce religious ethics to a mode of analytic moral philosophy. In this sense, it may be analogous to the use of modern Western medicine, whose validity and applicability do not necessarily discriminate patients in terms of their origin, race, gender, or religion. Just as the acceptance of Western medicine does not entail the rejection of Eastern medicine, the use of analytic moral philosophy for religious ethics does not entail the denial of other approaches to religious ethics. In fact, religious ethics may well benefit from analytic moral philosophy as it may help bring greater clarity and coherence to the arguments made in religious ethics.

Now let me briefly state the main thesis of this book. In this study, I argue that responsibility ethics must be supported by a coherent and systematic ethical theory in order to be a relevant and effective moral discourse in the contemporary world. A careful analysis of Niebuhr's and Levinas's ethical thought through the lens of analytic moral philosophy serves an example of this thesis, as this study demonstrates that the responsibility ethics of each thinker suffers from some conflicting philosophical commitments. Both thinkers strongly defend ethical objectivism and cognitivism but appear to be far less committed to some other philosophical tenets that are central to their overall philosophical argument. In brief, Niebuhr expresses his objection to the existence of intrinsic value, as Levinas does to

ethical universalism. Both thinkers also show their uneasiness with the idea of representationalism for different reasons. However, I contend that, once some philosophical issues concerning representationalism are clarified, their overall arguments will be much more coherent and thus more compelling to others.

Let me now outline the basic structure of this study. Chapter One provides a general overview of ethical theory in contemporary social philosophy and analytic philosophy. Since this study looks at the place of ethical theory for responsibility ethics, it is important that we identify major philosophical issues and ideas and explain how they may be related to responsibility ethics. From Chapter Two to Chapter Five, I offer comprehensive accounts of Niebuhr's and Levinas's ethical thought, situating each in its historical, religious, and philosophical contexts and analyzing some of the major ethical ideas in each thinker. Chapter Two explores the theological and philosophical background to Niebuhr's ethics. Chapter Three provides a detailed analysis of Niebuhr's responsibility ethics, investigating close links among his ethical method, epistemology, theology, and responsibility ethics. Chapter Four, which is the correlate of Chapter Two, provides the philosophical background to Levinas's moral philosophy. Chapter Five focuses on Levinas's philosophy in order to demonstrate his distinct contributions to responsibility ethics. In Chapter Six, I undertake a philosophical investigation into the two thinkers' responsibility ethics in terms of contemporary analytic moral philosophy and reconstruct their ethical theory in order to critically evaluate it. Chapter Seven explains the relevance and significance of ethical theory for responsibility ethics by way of the philosophical insights learned throughout this study.