

## **Responsive self-preservation: Towards an anthropological concept of responsiveness**

Kasper Lysemose  
Aarhus University

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to catch up with a conjecture designated by the term 'responsive self-preservation'. This term appears neither strikingly beautiful nor intuitively understandable. Obviously it is a convoluted terminus technicus in need of conceptual clarification. The reasons for introducing it should therefore be good. That this is the case cannot be guaranteed from the outset. What can be offered here is a substitution of good reasons with high ambitions: the concept of 'responsive self-preservation' is designed to illuminate the *conditio humana*. In all brevity the claim is that human beings are responsive beings. This means that they do not just exist. In order to do so, they must respond to their existence. On the one hand the inner drive and utmost aspiration in human responsiveness therefore lies in self-preservation. On the other hand self-preservation is thoroughly transformed when embedded into human responsiveness. The article will thus use the concept of responsiveness and the concept of self-preservation to mutually clarify each other – in order to open the possibilities and avoid the pitfalls in each of them. In doing so, it aspires to intervene in contemporary philosophical anthropology.

**Keywords:** Self-preservation, responsiveness, philosophical anthropology, ethics, Waldenfels

La plus grande des responsabilités humaines – physiques et morales – est la responsabilité de notre verticalité. (Bachelard 1943, 47)

### **1. Homo erectus**

To gain a pre-understanding of responsive self-preservation let us begin with the notion of *homo erectus*. This

notion is used here as a heuristic metaphor. Methodologically its function is not to *justify* but to *access* the concept of responsive self-preservation. In this respect it may need to be stretched somewhat – and even then still prove to be insufficient. Nonetheless, the intuition is that it can lead us on the right track.<sup>1</sup> The upright position has become so habitual to us that we usually do not think of it as an achievement. Instead we devote our interest to the vast space of actions it has made possible. And surely what ‘the freeing of the hands’ enables us to achieve is astonishing. Even so, it remains an achievement in itself. To sense this, one need only observe an infant learning to stand and walk. What troublesome endeavour! What admirable persistence!

What is obvious from witnessing this familiar drama is that having two feet on the ground instead of four increases the demands of balance tremendously. Rebelling so outrageously against gravity means that the infant must carry himself in every move he makes. Life in the upright position is burdensome. It is a life that cannot just be lived but must be lead. And observing the toddler, it is evident that the ability to do so is not innate but learned. It is a skill obtained only in a rigorous training program.

After being subjected to this program the child will have adopted an altogether new relation to the world and to his own body. The latter is no longer just a given medium of spontaneous movement but an acquired one. The experiential immediacy of the lived body is in the upright position always a mediated immediacy. Inhabiting this position presupposes that the child has performed a strenuous incorporation into his own body, which in turn conditions the spontaneity of his highly enhanced *I can*. Henceforth the body is therefore not only lived as a centre from which the child acts out but also discovered as an object he can enact himself eccentrically into. The upright stance is the apprenticeship test in this respect. Later advancements into athletic performance and ascetic endurance are testimonies to this initial making the body an object of techniques.

The basic technique involved in vertical existence is one of balance. And since this mode of existence is extraordinarily

exposed to the risk of falling, even the slightest impact is a danger. In order not to fall the child must become highly attentive to changes in the gravitational field and able to adjust accordingly. Keeping balance means being able to register such challenges – sometimes even before they occur – and to improvise an answer. It is, in short, imperative that the child develops responsive skills. Without such skills he will fall to the ground.

The quadruped, of course, is also exposed to the danger of falling, but not in the same degree. Accordingly a quadruped is not in need of the enhanced responsive skills indispensable to the biped. This is probably why the dog behaves so frantically when it is on a bumpy train and feels the ground moving. That merely standing on its legs becomes such a challenge is unusual, and it reacts promptly by lying flat down. For humans this situation is normal. A being so destabilized must always struggle to maintain balance.

We may therefore say that self-preservation in the upright stance must be exceptionally responsive. Indeed, so responsive that this kind of responsiveness becomes qualitatively different. To put it a bit dramatically, *homo erectus* would fall in every moment did it not perform a *conservatio continua*. Its being is through and through a result of responsive self-preservation. Our metaphor has thus led us to an idea that we get an inkling of when Simmel writes:

Perhaps the structure of existence entails that every being in every moment would be annihilated, devoured and left devoid of a self by what is outside of it – and perhaps also by what is in it – if it did not resist against this by a wholly positive doing and actively asserted its own being. Since this necessity never lessens, not even for a moment, self-preservation is in any case the utmost a being can attain. All that it does is only means to or more accurately the acts of its self-preservation. (Simmel 1996, 117f)<sup>2</sup>

To walk on two legs is to avoid a fall lurking in every step, as it were. It is continuously to give up balance and find it again. Living vertically therefore means never being in possession of a fixed stance, but always on the lookout for it. *Homo erectus*, then, is truly *das noch nicht festgestellte Thier* (Nietzsche 1999, 81). Every step along its way is accompanied

by the concern: will I find a foothold where I have been anticipating myself standing – or will I fall? It does not have a pre-given stance to preserve, but only an anticipated stance to acquire. In a sense, therefore, it is a being which is not where it is. But it responds to this lack of *Fest-stellung* – this inner utopia – by placing itself outside itself and is always moving towards such *Vor-stellungen*. However, no matter where it decides to go, no matter where it anticipates itself standing, it must always go there in a self-preservative way, i.e. maintaining balance. And so, if we ask what is the self being preserved, we must answer that it does not reside in a pre-given position. Nor will it be found in the anticipated ones. Rather, it is the always accompanying concern – or *Sorge* as Heidegger would have it.

## 2. Responsiveness and self-preservation

After these preliminary clues, let me now single out ‘responsiveness’. The term is primarily associated with the phenomenology and ethics of the German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels. The present paper is deeply indebted to Waldenfels’ endeavour. It is, however, not the ambition to give an account of his highly elaborate theory, but to select and perhaps also add certain features suitable for the present anthropological enterprise, taking in each case as point of departure the thesis that *human beings are responsive beings*.

### 2.1. Do something!

*Human beings are responsive beings*. They are called upon to respond. No one can escape this. Even *no* is an answer (Waldenfels 1994, 357). But if we cannot not respond, how then can responding be something demanded of us? How can it be an imperative if our very being has already fulfilled it? We may call this peculiarity an ontological imperative.

Usually our notion of an imperative presupposes that we distinguish between the agent and his agency in a way that allows us to say that there is *first* an agent and *then* some prescriptions to which he should conform. This is not the case

in human responsiveness. Responsiveness comes before the distinction between what is and what should be. From basic philosophical training we are instructed not to deduce 'ought' from 'are' or vice versa. And that is perfectly fair and square. It is just that in the case of human responsiveness we do not need such an inference. To respond is not something we should do, but something we are. Yet, it remains an imperative. To say that human beings *are* this imperative means that they have their being only in responding.

In every demand we can distinguish between *what* is demanded and *that* something is demanded. Usually we are attentive to what is being demanded. We are engaged in finding ways to comply with it or perhaps to avoid it. Doing so, we are absorbed so wholly by the fact that we are being subjected to the demands of someone or something that it escapes our attention. To gain an understanding of this often anonymous surplus let us consider a special and illuminating case.

If someone enters my bedroom while I am asleep and shouts *wake up!*, something is demanded of me, namely that I wake up. But it is demanded in a way which brings the *that* of the demand to the fore. For in this case I cannot hear the demand without succumbing to it. To be aware of this imperative is identical with the impossibility of not complying with it. With the imperative inhabiting human responsiveness it is likewise. The *that* of this demand is a surplus in relation to the *what* of the demand. This surplus is in itself purely formal. It does not demand anything from us except that it demands – or rather awakens – our 'demandability'. Pervading all concrete demands, it is a demand that we are inescapably subjected to no matter what we answer.

With this line of thought we have reached another feature of 'the responsive imperative'. Besides being ontological in a paradoxical sense and demanding in an unavoidable way, it is also wholly indeterminate. This is a claim that is not easy to understand though. How can an imperative meaningfully be said to be indeterminate? It seems only fair that if someone were to say *thou shall* I would wish at least to know what I was supposed to do. But to this seemingly righteous question the responsive imperative gives no answer. Being responsive thus

means being *subjected* to a kind of pressure that does not push in any direction. It simply strikes with the experience: *I must do something! I must respond!*

We can perhaps describe being affected in this way as a trembling state of tension susceptible to being released in a certain intention; or perhaps as an accumulation of aimless energy in need only of an occasion to be channelled in a definite direction – or in similar ways. The problem appears to be a ‘too much’ rather than ‘too little’. It is not that a lack of energy – of money, power, time or other ‘resources’ – makes it impossible for the responsive being to do all that it wants. Rather, it does not know what it wants and is at the same time exposed to an abundance of energy that compels it to must want something.

This is illustrated well by a common experience of parents. What parents discover is that the cause of a certain well-known unease in their infant is not only that it is denied something it wants. It is precisely on this initial assumption that the relief of the infant upon receiving what it wants appears so remarkable short. If the unease was caused simply by the distress of not having the thing, the relief should have lasted longer the parents reckon and ask: what then is the cause? Is it perhaps not knowing what to want? If this is the case, getting something is only a transient remedy to the situation. The excess of incentive energy will soon prompt the question: *what now?* The real drama, therefore, unfolds prior to getting or not getting something, namely in the middle of the sentence likely to have the highest frequency of use among small children: the infant exclaims loudly and with obvious distress *I want...* then looks around the room for something it *can* want, notices a cell phone, a candlelight, a postcard, an empty bowl *or whatever* and continues with noticeable relief *...that one!* (Gehlen 2004, 343).

## 2.2. Too late and too early

*Human beings are responsive beings.* This has two immediate consequences. On the one hand the existence of a human being is posed to it as a question. On the other hand the human being exists only in answering this question. Spelled out

in this way, it becomes evident that the thesis encompasses a paradox. Human existence is both prior to and the result of human responses. This paradox, however, is not a regrettable fallacy but a significant feature of human responsiveness. And if we refrain from dissolving it into a linear model, it amounts to the idea that human existence extends itself across an unbridgeable divide.

We can describe this structure as a deferral in responsiveness. It implies that the existence of a human being is not only where it apparently is, i.e. *here and now*. It is prior to this as a question that is always already answered; and it comes after this as a response that is never yet completed. We are in this sense both before and after ourselves. This means that for a human being it is always inaccurate to say *here I am*, *this is me* or the like. No indicative can ever capture my being no matter how elaborate it may become. For on the one hand I am too late. Whenever I say *here I am*, I was already there and what I indicate is a certain response to this 'already'. On the other hand I am too early. I am never here yet and what I indicate is therefore at the same time a provisional pretence. This does not falsify my indication. Indeed, it makes it possible. The inaccuracy in indication is a condition *sine qua non*. I could not point to myself – I could not stand out from the anonymous block of being – were it not for this inner deferral.

My responses are thus always *deferred*. They can never wholly catch up with the existential question that I am. They presuppose it. But nevertheless, this question has always been *transferred* into possible answers. I never have it in itself to begin from. What I have instead is these transferences, i.e. the 'metaphors that I live by'. If the question comes first and the answer comes second, as we would be inclined to think, we are thus obliged to say that the first is always already transferred into the second. In short: *the second is the first*.

As paradoxical as this appears, it describes a structure of responsive self-preservation. A responsive being cannot exist without having responded to the question of its existence. Correspondingly, to ever encounter this question in itself, prior to any response, would render it utterly responseless – and this would, *ex hypothesi*, amount to an annihilation of its being. It is

therefore impossible that it has ever been in this situation. Had it been so, it would never have been able to give a response and thus never have come into being as a responsive being. The first is absolutistic. All beginnings from here would have to be purely spontaneous. Otherwise there could be no escape. A responsive being, however, is deferred from this origin. This is the condition for it to know the question that it exists as a response to.

Following this line of thought we can see that it cannot be a simple reversal when Waldenfels proclaims: “In the beginning was the answer.” (Waldenfels 1994, 270) Granted, this puts the answer where we would expect the question, namely first, but in doing so it is maintained that the answer remains second. Even though it is at the origin, it *is* an answer and as such it has the sense of *answering to something*. To say that the second is the first is therefore a statement that invites us to rethink our concept of origin. “When we take our point of departure from the answer, we do not replace the primacy of the question with that of the answer. It is rather that *all such primacies are avoided*.” (Waldenfels 1994, 193)

To illustrate this let us consider causality. Here the first is the first and the second is the second. *First* we have a stimulus and *then*, in accordance with some causal law, a response. In human responsiveness, however, a question-stimulus does not precede an answer-response. As Waldenfels writes: “It is not the case that *something* comes before us, e.g. as a causal stimulus that brings an effect about. We come before *ourselves*.” (Waldenfels 2010, 77) To explain this phenomenon in terms of causality would clearly destroy it – even if we were to invoke the notion of a *causa sui*. For though we *do* precede ourselves, we do so by way of an alterity that we are always and have always been called upon to answer.

### 2.3. Standing in place of the other

*Human beings are responsive beings*. But their answers cannot be wholly explained in terms of an order (cf. Waldenfels 1994, 334). The concept of alterity is designed to remedy this shortcoming not just of causal but of any ordering of

responsiveness. It does not designate a class of beings especially strange and challenging to find a suitable response to. It serves to indicate that we are always responding to something that is never wholly captured in our responses. No matter how ordinary the demand and no matter how orderly our response, demand and response will remain separated by an unbridgeable *hiatus*. Waldenfels calls this *the responsive difference*, i.e. the difference "... between the demand, *to which* we answer, and *what* we give as an answer by orienting ourselves toward a goal, a rule or a problem i.e. the answer we always give in a certain way..." (Waldenfels 1995, 420)

It is tempting to speak of an *inner* alterity. We would, however, have to specify then that 'inner' means neither inside the mind nor the body of the responsive being. Rather, it would mean that no matter where challenges come from, if they are given genuinely as challenges, and not just as stimuli that trigger certain reactions, then they are inherent in the deferred structure of any responsive experience. And this structure entails that every challenge comes with an alterity that can perhaps be neglected or suppressed but never eradicated. It is therefore more adequate to speak of a *radical* alterity – something indicated well by the very term 'responsiveness'. Contrary to spontaneity, which signifies that I begin from myself and by myself, it implies that I always begin from somewhere else. And this, markedly, is something to be discovered only *in giving a response*.

Only in answering to what we are struck by does that which has struck us appear as such [...] This answering is thus entirely to be thought of from a being-struck [*Getroffensein*], in the *deferral* of a doing which does not begin from itself but from the other... (Waldenfels 2002, 59).

Responses, in other words, are always in place of that which the responsive being is struck by. Reminiscing Derrida's 'originary supplement', Waldenfels calls this 'originary substitution' and explains: "I designate a substitution as originary if it makes us stand on our own feet, taking at once and from the outset the place of the Other." (Waldenfels 2011, 155) Allowing ourselves a metaphorological observation here, we will notice that we are all of a sudden back to our guiding

metaphor: the originary substitution makes us ‘stand on our own feet’!

A responsive being is constitutively disturbed by an alterity calling it into being. This calling is a demand that something must be done. Consequently such a being cannot just stand where it stands but must find a stance, i.e. it cannot stand in its own place but must find re-placements. This suggests the idea that we respond to alterity by way of substitution *and* that the outcome of this type of response is self-preservation. That this substitution is originary means that our being is not given to us first so that we only afterwards find various substitutions in order to preserve this being. Substitution takes place ‘at once’ and ‘from the outset’. Substitutions, therefore, are responsible for our being. And nevertheless they are not *ex nihilo* creators of it. Qua responses they remain responses to some alterity. As opposed to a well-known anthropological scheme we are therefore not first deficient beings which then compensate for our deficiency. Rather, we are in becoming by way of a substitution. And this substitution is not a substitution of something we already are but a response to an alterity that haunts us and perpetuate our becoming.

## 2.4. Nothing to preserve, everything at stake

*Human beings are responsive beings.* The exposition of responsiveness so far has hinted at an intrinsic connection to self-preservation. However, what immediately comes to mind when considering the term ‘self-preservation’ will most likely be a Darwinian struggle for existence and not a complicated, even paradox, concept of responsiveness. Our associations are that self-preservation is a *brute, blind* and *egotistic* struggle for the *mere* continuation of *naked* existence. To qualify human self-preservation as responsive challenges these connotations. But what happens to the supposedly well-known concept of self-preservation when it is embedded into the structure of responsiveness?

First of all we must insist that responsiveness is not a supernatural addition to nature. It does not even imply that we

have distanced ourselves *from* self-preservation as the general trend of evolution. Rather, it implies that we, as responsive beings, have come into being as a distance *within* this general self-preservation (cf. Stiegler 2009, 161). This means that in this particular case self-preservation does not begin with itself. It does not originate from the centre of a living being. Nor does it originate from some other being. It is neither spontaneous nor transitive. Rather, it responds eccentrically to itself – it is deferred from its own origin, it is haunted by alterity etc. Such summoning descriptions simply mean: it is not self-evident how I should preserve myself. Life does not live itself, it must be led. I must do something, but what? In my self-preservation I cannot originate from myself and act out. I must respond to a lack of such origination by substituting it or supplementing it with something I can ‘work on’.<sup>3</sup>

What is this ‘something’ that I work on? One of the usual connotations of self-preservation is to think of the implied self as a substance. And indeed, it seems obvious that self-preservation presupposes a self to preserve: *first* we have a self and *then* what this self does in order preserve itself. In this view there is no intrinsic connection between self and self-preservation. A self which in itself has nothing to do with self-preservation is compelled by strictly exterior forces to preserve itself. Self-preservation therefore denotes an ensemble of skills which a pre-given self develops and employs on occasion.

To think of self-preservation as responsive renders this instrumentalist interpretation problematic. A responsive self is a self which is not had prior to but only *in* responding. Responsive self-preservation therefore entails an intrinsic relation between self and self-preservation. It *does* entail an ensemble of responsive skills – but not in the sense of something the self *has*. Rather, the self *is* the ongoing becoming of them. And this genealogy is ruled by the principle of self-preservation. Responsiveness thus prompts the shift from a substantialist to a functionalist concept of self-preservation. Blumenberg alludes to this when he considers one of these responsive skills, the ability to develop self-understandings:

Self-understandings are constructions that aid self-preservation – however, in another sense than the ‘success’ in the struggle for

existence which always ‘appears’ as the possession of a ‘substance’ to be defended. (Blumenberg 1997, 122)

An immediate objection is that there is nothing self-preservation is about if a self is not given to preserve. It seems then that nothing is really at stake. However, quite to the contrary everything is at stake. When the unity of the self is not a substance underneath the surface of changing properties, there is no longer a reserve hidden away from being at stake. The self is entirely absorbed into this kind of self-preservation. Instead of being a given self only to be protected, it is wholly at risk in every step and always to be acquired.

Of course we might ask why we should speak about self-preservation at all then and not simply self-acquisition? The reason for insisting on this is the following: there is in a sense no self to be preserved, granted, but there is a self which *only in a self-preservative way* is to be acquired. The human self is, in other words, always becoming – not in the sense that we will have to wait and see if it does indeed turn out to be a human. Rather, the human being *is* a becoming-human. And self-preservation is the mode of this becoming. No matter where we aim at going – no matter what we succeed in or fail at becoming – as humans we are always subjected to the task of preserving balance in going there.

### **3. Responsive ethics and responsive anthropology**

#### **3.1. The *experimentum crucis***

In Levinas self-preservation is emphatically rejected. This is most prominently done in a dispute with Spinoza’s concept of *conatus* and Heidegger’s concept of *Sorge* – but also with the Darwinian notion of a struggle for existence. At the root of this contention we find a main concern in both Levinas and Waldenfels: how is it possible to engage with the other without annihilating his otherness?

If self-preservation was the overall impetus of subjectivity, it seems that it would not be sensitive to the demands of the other – or at least only in a derivative way. But it is not, according to Levinas, a concern for self-preservation

that constitutes subjects as subjects. It is rather a constant subjection to the demands of the other. Subjectivity always has its point of departure not in itself, but in these demands. It is always engaged in responding. As a result sensitivity to the other is built into its very structure and can never be only derivative.

Following this outlook, ‘responsive self-preservation’ will appear to be a contradiction in terms. But if we hesitate to reject the concept – bearing the above exposition in mind – it may lead to a detachment of phenomenology of responsiveness from ethics of responsiveness. These are of course inseparable within Waldenfels’ framework which echoes Levinas’ discomfort with self-preservation. If, however, responsiveness is turned into the distinguishing feature of a certain kind of self-preservation, they may very well fall apart at the seams – or at least have to be reconfigured significantly. The benefits in doing so should be an anthropologically sounder, even if ethically less saturated concept of responsiveness. In any case, the question of an ethically infused alterity is obviously the *experimentum crucis* in merging responsiveness and self-preservation.

### **3.2. What is responsive ethics?**

Responsive ethics in Waldenfels is first of all not a normative theory. It is not situated at the level of teleological, deontological, consequential, utilitarian, pragmatic, communicative or communitarian ethics. Accordingly, it does not seek to replace such theories with superior goals or better norms. Rather, it supplements them with a corrective. This is necessary because responsiveness cannot, as we have seen, be wholly ordered. The critical address of responsive ethics is therefore neither wrong ethics nor a lack of ethics but unyielding attempts to order responsiveness with ethical norms. In responding we *do* rely on order. Absorbing the radical alterity inherent in responsiveness into a certain order is, however, doomed to fail. With the particular prominence accredited to a cover text the reader thus enters Waldenfels’ *opus magnum* informed that the demand of the other works...

...as an antidote against all attempts to arrive at a rationalization or normalization which underrate their own origin. In line with *a mere preservation of reason or a system* such attempts set those irrational forces free that they pretend to ban away. (Waldenfels 1994, cover, italics added)

Waldenfels seems to view self-preservation as a principle of ordering, perhaps even as the preeminent one. Consequently the phenomenon of responsiveness necessarily evades it. The corrective of responsive ethics makes us aware of this. It reminds us that answering the demands of the other in terms of a certain order is never enough. For instance, when we treat the other entirely just in terms of a law, we are in fact not acting just (Waldenfels 1994, 586). And this is not because the given law is deficient. Further differentiation does not help. Rather, it is because the demands of the other always exceed the rights ascribed to him – just as the saying of something is always a surplus to what is said (Waldenfels 1994, 199). Responsive ethics, in short, is a guard of the responsive difference.

Responsive ethics is also a *genealogy* of ethics. The distinctions between wrong and right, good and evil etc. are in themselves neither. Where do they come from then? Here is a blind spot in all normative theory that calls for genealogy (Waldenfels 1995, 409-423). Waldenfels' procedure resembles here Husserl's more than Nietzsche's. His ethical epoché does not arrive at strong individuals without resentments but at basic levels of responsiveness challenged with pre-ethical forms of alterity. And from this *terminus a quo* the ambition is to show "...that there is a 'non-indifference towards the other', which does not allow a non-ethical neutrality." (Waldenfels 1994, 566) In this regard Waldenfels speaks "...repeatedly about ethical impulses in answering..." (Waldenfels 1994, 557) But what does this mean? 'Impulses' seems a vague word put in a place where decisive questions should be asked.

### **3.3. Self-preservation: empty...**

If responsiveness has its inner drive and utmost aspiration in self-preservation, then this apparent minimum is

in fact a maximum. Contrary to the Darwinian connotation this kind of self-preservation does not fit the model of *first food, then morality*. And contrary to classical Greek thinking it is not something that must be resolved first in order for the free man to leave the predicaments of *mere* life at home and enter the public arena to devote himself to the *good* life. Self-preservation here means something we do whatever we do.

In saying this we will have to emphasize a subtlety. Since all acts of responding are acts of self-preservation, self-preservation is in a sense independent of how it is enacted. *We cannot not preserve ourselves*. Self-preservation is entailed already in the *that* of responding. However, and this is of course equally important, the same does not go for the *success* of self-preservation. This is always at stake. Indeed, it seems that human beings ultimately fail no matter how they respond. All acts of responding, then, are acts of self-preservation, but they are in the end *despaired* acts of self-preservation. *We cannot succeed in preserving ourselves either*.

This is the misery of the human condition! Our self-preservation is not the self-preservation of pure reason. But, and this is its greatness, human responsiveness even finds a response to its own failure. Absolute demands, impossible situations and overwhelming challenges leave us responseless. Nevertheless, we still respond, namely to this responselessness. Not that this rescues us from it. It is just that we find a way to express it. This can, as Plessner has shown, occur in bodily gestures such as laughter and crying (Plessner 1982, 201-387). The most extreme case of a human response to the failure of finding a response, however, is undoubtedly suicide. And this is also the instance that allows us to demonstrate the full formality of self-preservation. For suicide could very well be presented as the obvious constraint on self-preservation. If it was truly an anthropological principle, suicide would be impossible. Obviously it is not. However, self-preservation does *not* exclude suicide – it occasionally entails it.

Only man can live and in doing so be unhappy. He can thus fail in attaining exactly that which seems to him the meaning of his existence. Even when he commits suicide he deploys the last of all strategies: he attempts to preserve himself at any price, even that of

life itself, in order at least not to be forced to deny his identity himself. (Blumenberg 2006, 550)

This observation offers us the opportunity to take leave with another immediate bias, namely that self-preservation is always concerned with life in the biological sense. Being alive is admittedly a very popular way of being human – and this it is even though the current rate of success strongly suggests that it will ultimately be unsuccessful. But it is nonetheless only *one* way of being human (Simmel 1996, 118).

### 3.4. ...yet profound?

Is any ‘ethical impulse’ left in this kind of self-preservation that seems to rule out nothing? If by ethical impulse we simply mean being affected by alterity then surely yes. This is essentially what responsive self-preservation is. To qualify such an impulse as ethical seems too hasty though.

Let us remark that an ethically downsized concept of responsiveness need not be an expression of cynicism. It may be a matter of saving the phenomena in question. Aspiring to an enhanced sensibility towards the other is certainly an honourable sentiment. Nevertheless, it is anthropologically insufficient. If responsiveness is to be the anthropological concept *par excellence*, it must not only address the pinnacle of humanity, e.g. its authentic or ethical modes. Also ‘the all too human’ – yes, even inhumanity – is part of the human. It is therefore imperative not to confuse anthropological and ethical responsiveness. Indisputably we have different responsive skills and have them in varying degrees, but responsiveness in itself is not a skill. It is our being. Responses that do not qualify as responses in the ethical sense remain responses in the anthropological sense.

The attempt, for instance, to absorb alterity into a given order and to leave no room for a corrective is bound to fail, as Waldenfels rightly points out. As responsive beings humans are constitutively open to alterity. But even as failed such an attempt remains part of the human register of responses. And when Levinas declares his *du wirst nicht töten*, Waldenfels is equally right in noticing that this is not an imperative

disallowing something but an indicative pointing to the future (Waldenfels 2002, 143). It speaks of the impossibility of eradicating the demand of the other. The futility of murder makes this wholly evident. There is nothing more that can be done and still the murderer is haunted by the other. But even so, why should the silencing of the other not be attempted just because it is impossible? As inescapably open to alterity responsiveness is, there is nothing in it that in the least animates the responsive being not to commit murder.

Responsive self-preservation in short contributes nothing towards the realization of any ethics. This is why the term 'impulse' is unfortunate. It hints exactly at such a direct genealogy. Nevertheless, there *is* an important sense in which anthropological and ethical responsiveness remain connected. This concerns the simple fact that openness to alterity is a precondition for all ethics. Non-responsive beings cannot be moral, only responsive ones can. We are misguided if, in the name of responsiveness, we opt for the *unsecure reality* of some norm, even just in the form of a corrective to existing norms. What we have instead is the *secure possibility* of normativity. For the ethically minded thinker this will seem little to be left with under the heading of 'responsive ethics'. But our inclination to expect more should not inhibit us from saving what is only less from the perspective of such expectations. Freed from these we may even come to fathom that this less may have an existential profoundness to it. As Simmel notes: "Nevertheless, it could be that the theory of self-preservation, as empty and logical as it appears at first, is the expression of a thoroughly profound, philosophical and basic attitude." (Simmel 1996, 117)

### 3.5. Get it right!

Is responsiveness emptied out to the point of insignificance by self-preservation? Have we gone too far in draining it of normativity? In fact, we might have. At least Waldenfels is on to something in making the following observation:

If every answer were equally good, then the answer would no longer be an answer which connects to what is said and engages with the offers of the other; if there were only one right answer, then the answer would no longer be an answer that replied. (Waldenfels 1994, 576)

All formality notwithstanding, there must be a question of answering appropriately. And so there is! Responsive self-preservation does not only contain a *do something!*, but also a *get it right!* This has to do with something already mentioned: that all responsive acts are acts of self-preservation does not mean that their success is granted. Self-preservation is perpetually put to the test. The question is *as what kind of person can I preserve myself?*

In Kant's concept of the self-preservation of reason this existential question is ordered by the moral law. Here self-preservation is the consistency of the will determined solely by the categorical imperative. The maxims of a life lived in this way form a coherent system. It is, in Husserl's corresponding view, a life lived in unanimity (*Einstimmigkeit*): "The ideal of true self-preservation: the I can only be content and happy when it remains an I in unanimity with itself..." (quoted in Kern 1964, 291). Among the many techniques, exercises and maxims that have been suggested under the general heading of *epimeleia heauton*, this idea of consistency or unanimity surely stands out as a strong one. Responsive self-preservation, however, evades even this type of ordering which, although accused of being too formal, proves not to be formal enough. This can be demonstrated by revisiting Kant's paradigm of a collapse of consistency: the act of lying.

Lying cannot be universalized into a general rule of conduct since lying is only possible on the assumption of a general propensity to speak truthfully. As a maxim it logically negates itself. Needless to say, this does not mean that it is impossible to lie. However, in Kant's view it *does* entail that it is impossible to *be* a liar, i.e. to preserve oneself as a lying person. In the name of consistency the moral law thus rules out lying as a mode of self-preservation. However, the impossibility of something does not rule out the attempt at it. And we must remember that this goes not only for the liar, but also e.g. for the moral person. To lie consistently is impossible, granted, but

to be a thoroughly moral person, to have a holy will, is equally out of reach. Indeed, it is questionable whether human beings are capable of finding any way to be something consistently. And this is not because these ways would not be ways of responding. It is just that human beings will inevitably despair in the pursuit of them. Despair, however, is *not* the end of responsive self-preservation! As indicated, human responsiveness distinguishes itself exactly by the ability to find a response even to responselessness. The *can* in *as what kind of person can I preserve myself* therefore does not depend on consistency. The self-preservation of reason cannot absorb human responsiveness. But how then, if not in the solitary consultation with the moral law, are we to depict this existential test?

At this juncture an almost folkloristic idea suggests itself, i.e. the idea that every person in the moment of death will view their life in its totality confronted with the question whether it is possible to affirm this life without the aid of hope or the sting of regret (cf. Wetz 1996). This idea offers a perspective that spells out in a certain way what *epimeleia heauton* is ultimately about. We have arrived at the notion of *melete thanatou*. This is not a theory on what happens after death, but an exercise to adopt provisionally a certain perspective on your life. Markedly, it is *not* an endorsement of the existentialist emphasis on finitude either, i.e. the idea that only a heroic encounter with the fact that I will eventually cease to be gives life intensity. Sure, death takes away *that I am*, but not *that I have been*. On the contrary it elevates this into an unalterable finality. And the remaining question is if I can affirm myself in this finality or, with an antiquated concept: if I can bear my own immortality. To be able to answer *yes* to this question would be the highest self-preservation. And what we answer to in answering here is not a categorical imperative. Contrary to this, the test of immortality does not offer any order that orders how this test is passed. It offers a perspective that remains completely formal, although normative.

This perspective corresponds with the concept of responsive self-preservation that entails a *do something!* which

is wholly indeterminate, but is nevertheless accompanied by a directional *get it right!* This may sound as a self-contradiction, but on due consideration it becomes tenable that to do something implies trying to get it right. For it is not an ethical addition regarding what shall and what shall not be done. The *get it right!* simply emphasizes that the something in *do something!* is something contrary to some other thing. When you do something you attempt to do *that* particular thing. The predicament, however, is that we do not know how to get anything right! We do not, in other words, know what *eudaimonia* is. We do not, for instance, know what it means to be or how to become a good friend, a good teacher, a good liar, a good murderer or a good saint. We must simply try these things out and put them to the test. As what we can preserve ourselves is not given, but the outcome of an ongoing experiment.

Ultimately we do not know what it means to be or how to become a human being. But to this indeterminacy we respond in multiple ways. And in responding we *are* in fact already *being human* in the only way possible, that is as *becoming human*. Being human is ‘not being finished’. Responsiveness is therefore literally of an in-finite importance. It is therein that our continued existence lies. As Gehlen writes, and I shall conclude with this dense formulation of the idea pursued at some length now:

In ‘naked existence’ it could be that an achievement of infinite importance is carried out. The imperative concerning this achievement is essentially incomprehensible and can only be indicated in a symbolic way because we *are* this imperative (Gehlen 2004, 72).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In general I am animated by the elaborate discussion of the concept of *Selbsterhaltung* that took place in Germany in the 1970s (cf. Ebeling 1976). To entertain the guiding metaphor I am applying here I appeal to the reader to have in mind the connection between self-preservation and upright position, which the word *Selbsterhaltung* immediately alludes to.

<sup>2</sup> This and all subsequent non-English quotations are translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> I use the phrase 'work on' in reverence to Blumenberg's idea of an *Arbeit am Mythos*.

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**Kasper Lysemose's** main fields of interest are philosophical anthropology, phenomenology and hermeneutics. Lysemose wrote his PhD on the philosophy of Hans Blumenberg and has since published on Kant, Cassirer, Husserl, Heidegger, Gehlen and others. Recently he has published "Subjectivity and the throwing hand", in SATS 13/1, 2012, 1-18 and "The being, the origin and the becoming of man" (*Human Studies* 35(1), 2012).

**Address:**

Kasper Lysemose  
Aarhus University  
Department of Philosophy and History of Ideas  
Nordre Ringgade 1  
8000 Aarhus C, Denmark  
Phone : (+45) 26 29 39 88  
Email: [filkl@hum.au.dk](mailto:filkl@hum.au.dk)