

# Practical Necessity

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## What *I* have to do

**Everyone recognizes imperatives:** I have to clean and skin the fish if I am going to cook it. I have to cook the fish if I am to have any supper tonight. I have to buy lumber if I am to build this house. I have to work out these mathematical data if I am to know how much lumber I will have to buy. In working out this mathematics, I have to follow the rules for calculation. These imperatives are “hypothetical”; they follow from projects my contingent desires have conceived.

But the imperatives my action obeys, in cleaning and skinning the fish properly, in selecting the lumber needed, are material imperatives, inscribed in the substance and structure of the things I work with. The grain of the wood dictates the direction and force I must apply to the plane; the type and thickness of the wood and of the studs dictates the type of nails, which in turn dictate the hammer I must use, which in turn dictates how I must hold and swing the hammer. The relation between desire, project, and imperatives is reversed; my desires and my project now depend on the material imperatives of things. In the course of subjecting myself to the material imperatives of things, my desire and project may themselves change: I may find that this ground is too unstable for my house and I have to situate it higher up, and then come to find that I prefer the view from the house up there.

Are there imperatives that are imperative *simpliciter*? Are there not practical imperatives that impose themselves independently of our desires and projects?

This occurs, Bernard Williams explains,<sup>1</sup> when something of intrinsic importance is seen to be fragile and threatened, and exhibits to me what has to be done, and does so with immediacy and urgency. Their own intrinsic importance, the importance of the sequoias, the rivers, the glaciers threatened by global warming, the urgency of their needs that press immediately on me who is here, closes the space which

expectation of enjoyment opens for my appropriative projects. Strolling in the sequoia forest, I come upon a discarded, still smoldering, cigarette-butt in the dry leaves. I am here, and what has to be done has to be done right away. But also *I* must do it—because I can. Running as I do each day in the forest, I have the strength, which the old couple who stopped me do not have, to free the deer caught in the branches of a tree in the flooding river.

My action can be said to be rational, inasmuch as an outsider, or myself at a later time, can supply reasons for it. But it need not be rational in the sense that I act on reasons, that I want to formulate beliefs and want these beliefs to be the cause of my action. The clarity of what has to be done, and the immediate urgency with which it presses on me, may well make unnecessary and even obstruct the intellectual will to formulate reasons and the practical will to make my actions issue from those reasons.

*What I have to do* is also set forth by a thought that grasps a particular situation with coherent and consistent concepts that apply to a whole class of which this situation is taken to be an instance. This situation is concrete; the action required will have to see the particularities of this situation and adjust its particular moves to them.

Is not that kind of clear sense of *What I have to do* constant with artists? A dancer heads for the studio for the day's work, ignoring all the tasks and pleasures she could share with others and that solicit her on the way. In the studio, *What I have to do* today is clear to her and undeniable. But it is also clear that she has to be a dancer—not because she aims to get rich and famous, but because dance must exist and her body is made for dancing. Paul Gauguin abandoned his family in order to pursue his art.

I am moving next month to Fatu-iva, a still almost cannibalistic island in the Marquesas. There, I feel, completely uncivilized surroundings and total solitude will revive in me, before I die, a last spark of enthusiasm which will rekindle my imagination and bring my talent to its conclusion.

But is not the clear sense of *What I have to do* also constant with everyone engaged in a work that is important—a fireman in a city and a guard in a lookout in the Himalayan forest during the dry season, a retired person living by the sea where the sea birds are engulfed in an oil spill, and a Guatemalan Indian whose people have been driven to the rocky high mountains, caring for his *milpa*?

*What I have to do* is not determined only by what I can do. I have to stay with a dying friend, though the doctors and nurses have done everything that can be done. I have to stand for a minute of silence

during the burial of children killed by a gunman in another country. I have to grieve for the plundered forest.

### **The Categorical Imperative**

Immanuel Kant located a “categorical” imperative weighing immediately upon our faculty of thought. As soon as thought arises, it finds it must conceive things correctly and reason rightly. It must conceive things with coherent concepts and relate them consistently. It must then maintain itself in exercise. This imperative is not simply a program the rational mind sets before itself; its imperative force comes as from the outside. This extramundane and extrasubjective exteriority Kant represents as issuing from a creative God who destines the mind for the world. This representation is not a re-presentation of a phenomenal event, but a necessary hypothesis.

In order to conceive things correctly and reason rightly, I have to move toward and around things so as to perceive them in ways that lend themselves to coherent concepts. The imperative weighing on thought must become practical; it must command my sensory and practical powers. Rational thought must maintain itself in action; I must envision a given situation with consistent and coherent concepts, and what I do must be what is to be done in every like situation. I must act on reasons, make valid reasons the cause of my action.

I must then realize my mind as a rational faculty, and realize myself in action as a purely rational agent.

Not only practical reason but also theoretical reason must apply itself to content in order to exist as thought; thought must apply itself to nature. Kant assumes that the only way nature can present itself to knowledge is in the form of a totality governed by necessary laws.

But in fact, there are many theoretical and applied sciences because the concepts that conceive things consistently and the laws that relate them coherently are not the same in physics and in biology, in psychology and in economics. Microphenomena and macrophenomena cannot even be understood with the same laws of the properties of space and time. The laws, formulated in different concepts and applied to different content, do not even have the same form: even within physics there are statistical laws, without true universality and necessity. In every scientific discipline, *ad hoc* concepts and laws are contrived for limited regions. These turn out to be intellectual imperatives; they are also necessary if we are to understand the data. They are also practical necessities: the question “What must I (or anyone) think about this given these data?” already involves “What will I (or someone) have to do to verify this empirically, to argue for it, and to have it accepted by the community of physicists?”

The actions required to verify a proposed empirical truth, to argue for it, and to have it accepted by the community of physicists will require completely *ad hoc* thinking. Even if all my laboratory equipment is standardized, practical thinking that applies the manufacturer's directions will never be sufficient; I will have to clear off dust that may have settled here or there, take into account the temperature and lighting of the room.

It is practical necessity that dictates then what kind of thought is required in realizing actions such as verification and confirmation by other researchers. It is also practical necessity that dictates when theoretical thought must obey an imperative for the universal and the necessary, and when it must instead elaborate statistical and *ad hoc* ways of understanding.

### **The Imperative That Faces**

Emmanuel Levinas locates a categorical imperative not in the rational agent I must maintain in myself, but instead in the one of my species who faces me.

Thought takes form in language, and rational thought not only gives reasons for every objection a thinker may imagine, it also responds to statements put forth by others and submits its affirmations to the contestation of others.

Statements have not only an indicative form, but a vocative and imperative force. This force is formulated in the grammatical forms of greetings, questions, and orders, but in fact every statement put forth is put forth in response to other statements and calls for a response in turn. For Emmanuel Levinas, it is not the confusing layout of the environment that questions and orders our discourse, nor the practical necessities that states of things may impose on us, but the presence of other speakers. The imperative does not weigh atemporally on my faculty of thought; it is an event.

Levinas locates the vocative and imperative force in the movement by which other speakers present themselves, face us. For to face us is to call for our attention and demand something from us. What another requires is a response in words and also in deeds.

A veridical response in language formulates a state of affairs in the environment open to one's own observation and the other's verification. A practical response to the requirement another presents activates our skills and works on the resources at hand in our environment.

Levinas phenomenologically describes the face as not simply the surface of a substance, which, like all things, solid substances, removeables and furnishings (*meubles*), is given to our eyes and hands that cir-

cumscribe and appropriate. On the surfaces of the one who faces us, hunger and want, the traces of wounds and suffering, the wrinkles of sickness and aging are visible and tangible. His or her skin is a surface exposing sensibility, susceptibility, and vulnerability. In presenting himself to us, he exposes his need and wants; in singling us out, he appeals to our resources. She does this also in a question that asks for a veridical response. She asks for a response that casts the things open to our detachment and appropriation in the form of things accessible to manipulation by others.

The other who faces remains an appeal addressed to us, Levinas says, because the appeal is displaced and renewed whenever it is satisfied. The response with which we answer another's question is put to his or her judgment, and is open to further question on his or her part.

What makes this exposure of a want, hollowing itself out in the measure that it is filled, a demand put on us? A demand is a force that binds our will. It cannot be understood simply in terms of the negativity of susceptibility and vulnerability. When it comes to an event, it is each time a specific force. But it is not positive with the positivity of mundane things. Mundane things regulate our acts with the plenitude of their physical force. Levinas explains that the alterity of the other is both that of the lack and the need in his mundane substance and that of the removal by which he stands beyond every response we give to him, and the force that figures in this distance and that judges our response, contests it, or accepts it. It is both the alterity of the distance at which he stands beyond every representation we form of his or her presence, and the force that arises there to contest that representation or accept it. This otherness cannot be understood as a compound of the negativity of want and the positivity of force. Levinas concludes that alterity must be conceived as an ontological category other than being and other than nothingness. It is abstracted from being and nothingness, and absolute in itself.

This extramundane and extrasubjective alterity is the exteriority of the imperative. But it is also an event in the world. It is presented, as what is ungraspable and unappropriatable, in the visibility of the face that looks at me.

Bernard Williams takes the imperative addressed to me by another of my own species to be a specific case of practical necessity. The one who faces me with his wants and needs appeals to my resources and my action. What makes his appeal categorically imperative is its immediacy and urgency. Someone, in cramps or panicking, is in danger of drowning, and I am the one who can swim. This child in Amazonia has a severely infected cut, and I the tourist am the only one in the region with the money to fly him to the hospital. I am walking in the crowds

in the city, preoccupied with my own affairs, and it is to this one who greets me that I have to turn my attention and reply.

Importance is also a factor. *What I have to do* is clear to a nurse in a refugee camp and to a mother in that camp. The nurse ignores the greeting of the bored guard.

Levinas, however, far from seeing the imperative addressed to me by another of my own species as a specific case of practical necessity, finds the importance, urgency, and immediacy of a “categorical” imperative only in the presence of another of my species. For him, all the material imperatives one can recognize in acting with things, or with other non-human living beings, are “hypothetical.” It is my enjoyment that discovers the sensuous elements—the ground, the light, the air, the warmth—and my appropriation and enjoyment that detaches things from elements and maintains them as things. In the encounter with others, they acquire an imperative to be formulated in ways that make them available for another’s view and make them available for another’s needs.

This position seems to us untenable. It is not possible to reinterpret all the cases where the intrinsic importance of something or some non-human living being that is frail and threatened, and the urgency of what has to be done imposes itself upon me because I am there and can do what has to be done, as deriving from the demands addressed to me by others of my species. And to find an imperative in the needs and wants of others of our species alone gravely misinterprets those needs and wants and that imperative itself.

For Levinas it is suffering, and not the lacks and vulnerability of things, even non-human living things (which are strangely absent from his thoughts) that has importance, suffering which is mired in itself that requires assistance, and immediately afflicts my sensibility and my powers to act. It is not the damaged surfaces of things and non-human living things, but the wounds and wrinkles of the skin, surface of exposure of sensibility, that expose an appeal and, singling me out in facing me, impose a demand.

This suffering is, however, visible as a determinate demand put on me in those wounds and wrinkles inscribed in a life that finds tasks in the world. It is not some kind of metaphysical anguish—or if it is, it is an anguish over the state of the world which is concerned with oneself only inasmuch as one finds oneself in such a world.

The suffering I see may well be a suffering that does not seek to be consoled: Nietzsche warned against imagining that we should alleviate a suffering which another needs and clings to as his or her destiny—the inner torments of Beethoven, the hardships and heartaches of the

youth who has gone to join the guerrillas in the mountains, the grief of someone who has lost her child. To be afflicted with his or her suffering requires that we care about the things he or she cares for.

Another's words of greeting open a silence for our words but also for our reticence and our tact before the importance, urgency, and immediacy of the demands of things. The suffering of the one who faces me, a suffering visible in the bloodless white of her anguished face, may well be not the suffering of her own hunger and thirst, but a suffering for the animals in her care dying from drought or the peregrines in the poisoned skies, a distress over the crumbling temple and for the nests of seabirds broken by the tidal wave, a grieving for the glaciers melting under skies whose carbon dioxide layers are trapping the heat of the earth.

Is it only his or her suffering that appeals urgently to us, has importance, and afflicts us immediately? Is there not always joy in the one who faces us, even joy in his suffering—the joy of finding us? Joy is an upsurge that affirms itself unrestrictedly, and affirms the importance and truth of the face of the landscape illuminated by joy. The one who faces us in joy does not only radiate his joy which we find immediately on ourselves; it requires a response. The thumbs-up that the Brazilian street kid gives—his mouth too voraciously gobbling our leftover spaghetti to smile or say *obrigado*—is a gift given us that we must cherish in the return of our smile, a gift that we have no right to refuse. But the joy of the street kid is not only contentment in the satisfaction of his hunger; it is a joy of being in the streets, in the sun, in the urban jungle so full of excitements, and it is in his laughter pealing over the excitements of the urban jungle and the glory of the sun reigning over the beaches of Rio that gives rise to his hunger and his relishing the goodness of restaurant spaghetti.

### **Intersubjectivity and Objectivity**

Objectivity is constituted in science. Science, Husserl explained, is produced when every observation-report is subjected to contestation without restriction, and the one who puts forth that statement commits himself to answer any objection. By giving a reason for the observation, the scientist produces empirical laws; by giving a reason for empirical laws, he produces a theory. The scientist subjects the form of his statements to the order of nature because he subjects his discourse to the demand for reasons on the part of other observers.

Levinas makes the form of objectivity not only correlative with, but founded on intersubjectivity, an intersubjectivity of singular subjects who appeal to and contest one another. By giving one another not only

material resources, but information, they constitute commonplaces and the zone of the world each perceives as common.

In making, with my words, what I see available to the one who faces me, I only envision the elements as destined for my enjoyment and also his, and in making, with my deeds, the goods I have appropriated available for his needs, I maintain the urgency of my needs which have constituted them as goods. What we constitute is an egoism answering to another egoism and whatever we agree upon becomes our ideology. The world continually fragments as it forms, for each new subject born appropriates it for himself and his appropriation will be contested in turn.

Levinas introduces the third party. A third party faces us who face one another. He judges the adequacy of my response to my interlocutor and the adequacy of my interlocutor's response to my response.

The next one to come along becomes the third party inasmuch as he demands a language in which all could communicate the perceptions of each. He would not ask that what I see be made available for all to see. He would not ask for his needs, but for the needs of all the others. In him the infinity of demands following every response, of needs met opening upon other needs, would be yet more unending; in him the absoluteness, the abstractness of alterity would be yet more absolute and abstract. Levinas names "God" this dimension of distance and unending demand that speaks in him. Or should it be named "nature?"

Science, which envisions things objectively, does not view them as sustenance and resources shaped by our needs. Scientific observation investigates how things are structured and how they function to maintain themselves and to produce effects on other things. It does not view them as relational nexus of force in Heidegger's sense. For Heidegger, the functional property of a hammer is simultaneously how it fits against the inertia of the nail and how it fits the hand that drives it. The physicist aims to see how a molecule maintains its constituents within itself, how each functions within that molecule, and how it functions when attracted or repelled by other molecules. When he inevitably sees how it functions within his observational instruments and before his eyes, he seeks to identify the distinctive effects of his instruments and the particularities of human sense organs. The astronomer seeks to understand how stars are formed and maintain themselves, how they affect other stars and black holes and anti-matter, and how they come to an end. A mathematician investigates the properties and functioning of mathematical domains independently of any foreseeable use, whether in the natural sciences or in technology. It has been said that the scientific view upon the universe is a God's-eye view. It is, more exactly, the view of humans more abstracted from



their needs and desires, which sees how all other living beings see and respond to hypothetical imperatives and practical necessities and how things record the beings and forces about them and respond to them.

The mathematician's office, the physicist's laboratory, the astronomer's telescope are so many zones of extraterritoriality where the subjugation of scientific objectivity to human needs and desires is broken. It is true that scientists are also specialists who require the support of the nonscientific society, and nonscientific people who relegate some of their resources to support scientific research ask to what uses it can be put. (It is also true, in that regard, that the wants and needs of people have less force than the greed of capitalists.) Scientists themselves have from the beginning espoused an ideology to the effect that science is power put in the hands of the human species. But, as Freud said, science has affected a triple decentering of the human species, dethroning its earth from the center of the universe, displacing man from his position as terminus of evolution, and displacing his conscious needs and desires from the center of his unconscious organism. When astronomers have discovered more recently that our sun is already halfway toward its extinction, when evolutionary biologists have come to understand that the human species and indeed mammals prevailed over the dinosaurs not because they were more fit but because great catastrophes destroyed not only thousands of species but whole phyla that might otherwise well have prevailed, and when biogeneticists come to see the human organism itself as the nutritive medium for the replicating DNA molecules, science becomes ever more detached from the shapes human needs and desires may put on things.

Scientists have also become more aware of the measure to which their observations are determined by decrees, issued by experts and endorsed by the community of working researchers, as to what can count as an observation, what degrees of exactitude are possible and required, what can count as an argument, and what can count as a demonstration. The result of their work, the objective representation of the different domains of their investigations, appears as the discourse of specific human communities at specific stages of their civilizations.

However, a piece of objective knowledge is not just an agreement between a specific number of trained researchers; it is an agreement about how something can be seen to function. It is not just a statement about how these men and women speak to one another, responding to one another's questions; it is also a statement about how this dinosaur perceived and moved in its *Umwelt*, how this spider perceives and behaves in the layout circumscribed by its perception, the features of an environment of limited scope that this protozoa is sensitive to and responds to. It is a statement of what celestial beings and forces this

planet records and responds to, a statement of what atomic beings and forces this molecule records and responds to. The technology enlisted for scientific research aims to extend the powers of the human sense organs with prosthetic organs enabling the researcher to see with the eyes of eagles and wasps, perceive with the sonar echolocation of bats and the sixth sense of fish, with the magnetic or cosmic sense of migratory birds and insects, with the sensitivity of single cells or single molecules in those bats and fish, to see with electronic sensors individual atoms and black holes at the remotest ends of the universe.

The objective truth which science works to represent is a representation which not only compounds my view with the views of other humans who face me, but the resultant compound of all human views is stripped of concerns for human needs and desires and located in its humble place among the views of birds, insects, dinosaurs, bats, fish, stars, and molecules.

Freud understood that the Copernican revolutions in science also work to alter our needs and desires which can only be needs and desires in the world. The permanent Copernican revolution in science continues to alter not only how we understand the ways our needs and desires can satisfy their urgencies, but those needs and desires themselves. Ecological sciences make it impossible for us to continue to see the earth, the air, the skies as existing only for our enjoyment, and the resources, the lakes and the mountains, the flood plains of rivers and the rain forests, the insects and the fish as existing only for our appropriation. How much technology today is being contrived to limit the growth of the human population, to preserve the habitats of species humans cannot use for food, to break down levees and vacate human settlements from flood plains, to preserve virgin forests and polar glaciers!

### **Practical Necessities in Conflict**

There is no doubt that practical necessities can conflict with one another. There may well be no way to rank, from some third party point of view, the importance with which situations put urgent demands immediately on individuals and groups. Responses require time and resources, which are always limited.

In expending my funds on medical treatment for my son who requires repeated and immensely complicated surgery, and in giving him all the attention and support he needs, I neglect the wants and needs of my other son and my spouse. In famine times, the bread I give from my stores to the stranger is taken from my own family. It is not only the stranger who knocks on my door who faces me, but the

strangers in remote lands, in Rwanda and Bosnia, who, today, face us in the appeals and demands brought by satellite relayed television into our living rooms. In turning to the one who faces me with his or her joy, I turn away from those who have no one but me to look to in their pain.

This stranger at my door needs bread; this child sick with cholera in a refugee camp needs rehydration; these street kids in São Paulo need a shelter with protective adults and education. The demand for bread for this street kid is an injustice done to the demand to organize a world economy that would really answer all these needs, and to organize the social and political structures of society to realize such a world economy.

Every guerrilla who is seized by the demand for the overthrow of the dictatorship that oppresses his whole people knows his struggle may fail, he may be shot with his comrades and buried in an unmarked mass grave, his passion for justice lost in the night and fog. He knows that if his struggle succeeds, he and his comrades do not know how to continue the revolution and preserve it from foreign intervention, corruption, and incompetence. He also knows he sacrifices his wife and children to answer the demand for justice. The demand for justice is an injustice done to those immediately before him whose needs are important and urgent.

Because an imperative is a practical necessity, Bernard Williams says it prevails over what is undoable. Because opening my stores to the famished refugees would give both them and myself and my children but one meal before we all starve, it cannot be imperative to do so. I cannot be obliged to leave the farm I am cultivating to go to the deserts of Ethiopia to assist engineers trying to dig wells. I cannot be obliged to turn from my neighbor whose house is on fire to study how to make all building material nonflammable. But Williams does add that the contemporary media, which presents us with the faces of famished and debilitated peoples on other continents that our prosperity exploits, and which give us access to economic, political, and technological information that makes progress toward solution possible, demands we become Samaritans today by responding to the question "Who is my neighbor?"

The truths of the sciences are also in conflict. We do not have the theories of translatability that would integrate microbiology into genetics, neurology into biology, biology into physics, quantum physics into relativity theory. These theories do not even have the same mathematical form; mathematics itself has lost its unity and fragments into region-specific mathematical disciplines. Different disciplines give conflicting accounts of the same phenomena. Within physics, unification theories and the Standard Model remain as yet projects, whose immi-

nent completion is periodically announced. Ethnobiology and cultural anthropology give incompatible accounts of kinship rules in human societies. The importance of a genetic explanation for human behavior conflicts with that of the theories useful in psychotherapy and education.

The mathematician in the extraterritoriality of his or her office, the physicist in his or her laboratory, the astronomer at his or her telescope, the biologist in his rain forest camp, who listen to the voices of numbers and volumes, of molecules and stars, have turned away from the human voices that put urgent demands on them. But to turn away from the intrinsic importance of the fragile and endangered earth, the air, the skies, the lakes and the mountains, and flood plains of rivers and the rain forests, the insects and the fish is also an injustice done to human voices.

#### NOTES

1. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 186-9.