

Anarchic Ethics: Rethinking Obedience with Ruskin and Levinas

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Obedience is a concept without much purchase in the modern academy. It often connotes unthinking submission to an authority figure; it is a mode in which totalitarian regimes enforce homogeneity. It is associated with a loss of individual will, an extinction of unique perspective in a mass of received opinion. As cultural critics, we are attuned to the insights of Althusser, who exposes how repressive ideological systems perpetuate themselves by coercing obedience and reinforcing their own assumptions, a cycle foreclosing change. We understand Foucault's examination of surveillance mechanisms such as the panopticon, which manipulate cooperation and socially-acceptable behavior. History is full of accounts wherein political or religious or social institutions have suppressed dissenting voices. The heroes go against the grain, speak out against oppression. Exposing the exploitation enabled through authoritarian manipulations of obedience has much potential to bring about social awareness and progress. Yet the valuable critique of obedience may also have its own homogenizing effect, overlooking the complexity of obedience as a concept. In a strictly logical sense, obedience itself is not identical to the institutions that coopt it; they are different not in degree but in kind. Obedience emerges as a content-less modality of relation, an unspoken assumption underlying the *ought* in any ethical argument. That is, critique depends on value judgments, and implicit in value judgments is the relation of obedience. Critiquing an oppressive system as something that ought to be defied presupposes an idea of justice that ought to be followed. This unspoken assumption is not always acknowledged, which can lead to some incoherence in ethical argument; for example, postmodernity's narrative asserts the equality of various forms of discourse or identity, accepting as legitimate all except those that go against its own, which are then dismissed as "dictatorial and totalitarian" (Badiou, *Logics 2*). Such a mentality is incoherent in its assumption that its own value system has priority as the most worthy to be obeyed, thus foreclosing change to its horizon

of possibility and even justifying wars against cultures whose political and religious systems do not agree with its values. The point is not to argue in behalf of totalitarian regimes against postmodern relativism, but to demonstrate that a larger ethical issue emerges from this difficulty: it appears that the abstract concepts of right and wrong, with their implicit assumption of obedience, are integral to what it means to be human; the sense of *ought* seems inescapable. Jeffrey Bloechl has framed the question well: how is it that we seem to be “always already committed to a specific language and sense of right and wrong? Had we not better concede a necessary relation to these commitments, and then dedicate ourselves to better understanding them, rather than simply reject them out of hand?” (2, italics original). He admits that such an acknowledgment of ethical commitment is difficult to speak about in this anti-authoritarian age (6). Yet the fact that it is present across human cultures, and that it is manifest both in different social systems *and* in arguments about those systems, gives one pause before the assumptions that obedience as an ethical concept is monolithic or that it has been somehow outgrown by a modern enlightened society. I would like to question both of these assumptions by triangulating the concept of obedience between two very different thinkers.

The first of these is the English art and social critic John Ruskin. Ruskin is one of the most polymathic writers of the nineteenth-century; his works fill thirty-nine library volumes and cover an enormously wide range of topics.¹ He is also hard to locate politically, for he describes himself paradoxically both as a “Tory” and as a “Communist” (29: 92; 27: 116, 167). He was furious with the exploitive system of industrial capitalism, and his critiques highly influenced the intellectual developments behind the labor movement. His work in this direction has been seen

¹ Agriculture, architecture, botany, calligraphy, drawing, education, engraving, ethics, geography, geology, history, meteorology, music, mythology, ornithology, painting, poetry, political economy, religion, and sculpture, to name some highlights.

as still relevant to understanding modern economic and political issues.² However, these liberal aspects clash with his class conservatism and morally imperative tone. He tried to organize a utopian society in opposition to the competitive structures of industrial capital, calling it the Guild of St. George and modeling it on the feudal guild system. According to Mark Frost's recent study of the Guild, Ruskin's insistence on the unquestioning obedience of the Guild's companions contributed to undermining its potential, making it "an atavistic and contradictory ideology and a history of flawed authoritarianism" (22). Yet as with most of Ruskin's thought, the notion of social obedience driving the Guild is only one dimension of how he theorized the concept of obedience. If not in practice, at least in theory, he describes two modes of obedience directed to two different sources, that of externally-imposed obligation to socially-structured written rules, and that of a personally-discerned, liberatory obedience to a beyond-human source which he calls God, a relation of *ought* irreducible to written rules. For him, the first type of obedience leads to liberation in the second type. Obedience is a complex concept.

But Ruskin is not the only one to have theorized a multivalent model of obedience; Emmanuel Levinas also does so. Levinas is very different from Ruskin as a twentieth-century Lithuanian Jew and democrat who lost most of his family to the Holocaust (*Righteous* 195).

Unlike Ruskin, who emphasized the interrelatedness of art and ethics, Levinas looks askance at

² For example, Judith Stoddart, in *Ruskin's Culture Wars: Fors Clavigera and the Crisis of Victorian Liberalism* (1998), historically situates *Fors Clavigera*, arguing that "*Fors* exemplifies the vexed relations between textual and cultural politics" in ways that "set the patterns for discussions of literature, history, and nationality in the new century" (22). Willie Henderson, in *John Ruskin's Political Economy* (2000), focuses on Ruskin's "economic and social criticism, based on recent research into rhetoric in economics" (i), arguing that his "insights [are] relevant to the longer-term development of economic understanding" (xiv). Gill G. Cockram, in *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age* (2007), has situated Ruskin's controversial later writings in conversation with classical political economy, Christian socialism, positivism, and New Liberalism, arguing that, despite the difficulty of situating someone "who professed so adamantly to be anti-partisan throughout his life" (3-4), a study of his influence will "restore his social thought to centre stage" (12). Stuart Eagles, in *After Ruskin: The Social and Political Legacies of a Victorian Prophet, 1870-1920* (2011), argues that Ruskin was one of the "chief inspirations" for those who "sought the reform of modern industrial society and political economy" (2). See also various essays in Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls' edited collection *Ruskin and Modernism* (2001).

the work of art as ethically questionable (Wehrs and Haney 16; Robbins xv, 75; Harold 71-72).³ He sees ethics as founded on a concept of obedience that is a dynamic modality of relation to the other. His view of ethics emerges in the perception that the sense of *ought* is anarchic in that it is pre-rational and constitutes humanity; he names this sense the absolute other and locates it as manifest in the face of the other person, binding one to an obligation of responsibility for that other. Increasing attention has been paid to Levinas's thought, much of which has considered how his ethics could be applied to particular social or political situations (Harold xvi). But Levinas's ethical philosophy has potential not just for viewing current situations; connections have also been made between his ethics and the nineteenth-century. Donald R. Wehrs and David P. Haney, introducing an essay collection on this subject, write about how Levinas's thought shares many "themes" or concerns with nineteenth-century writers, particularly the "important horizon" of the "desire to ground the self in something other, more comprehensive, and more responsible than its own rational intentionality" (30).⁴ This grounding in something other, as Levinas conceives it, is a dynamic relationship of obedience.

Levinas and Ruskin may seem an unlikely pair to think about together; nevertheless, comparing the different ways in which they theorize obedience offers a bioptical depth perspective on the concept that demonstrates its complexity as well as the urgency for

³ Levinas's conflicted view of the ethics of art and literature has been well examined in Jill Robbins' *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999); Seán Hand's "In a Strange Land: Levinas and Literature" (2006); Carolyn Forché's "Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art" (2011); and Knut Brynhildsvoll's "The Role of Ethics in Literature: An Approach" (2014). In his *Prophetic Politics* (2009), Philip J. Harold points out, "It does not seem to occur to Levinas that art might have an ethical purpose, in the right context it might ennoble and strengthen us to do good and avoid evil, might be a part of serving the other" (72).

⁴ Authors in this collection, *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism through Realism* (2009), connect Levinas's thought to British writers Wordsworth, Coleridge, De Quincey, Austen, Dickens, and George Eliot; American writers Emerson, Poe, Frederick Douglass, Hawthorne, Susan Warner, and Melville; and French writers Rimbaud, Blanchot, and Baudelaire, examining issues such as romantic subjectivity, otherness and race, the role of art and canon formation, and ethical questions surrounding genres such as autobiography and the novel.

understanding it. Their conceptions of obedience are multi-faceted, at times problematic but also provocative, showing how obedience emerges as a multi-dimensional modality of relation.

Understanding the contrasting ways in which these authors see these facets of obedience interacting may open a more perceptive ground to contemporary ethics whence to critique the totalitarian abuse of obedience, building off of Levinas's emphasis on an anarchic ethics whose source of obligation is irreducible to institutional closure.

Ruskin's Twofold Obedience

Ruskin's concept of obedience is strongly informed by his Christian worldview, obedience being one of the central characteristics he learned from his Evangelical parents. He went through a time when he was "*un-converted*," as he says, from Evangelicalism, yet he continued to value these characteristics throughout his life (29: 89, italics original; 35: 44).⁵ He believes that the essence of religion entails a relationship of obedience, not to the organization of a particular religious sect, but first and foremost to the higher authority of God, who commands that humans treat each other with justice and mercy (29: 92; cf. *KJV*, Micah 6.8).⁶ Such an orientation of obedience—religion as a "binding" in obligation to God (28: 156)—is fundamental to the ethical vision informing his writings on political economy and social interaction: "You

⁵ Stephen C. Finley's study *Nature's Covenant: Figures of Landscape in Ruskin* (1992) has examined Ruskin's unconversion, writing that his "impatience with his youthful 'pious insolence' and 'narrow enthusiasm' (4:110n; 3:54)" was in many ways a "caricature" that has colored understanding of his earlier work (3). He provides a more nuanced reading of Ruskin's Evangelicalism, while acknowledging "the almost inevitable distortion that results from having to see Ruskin's religious life and his own refracted reading of his sources across the horizon of a necessarily modern and secular reception of his work" (11).

⁶ Michael Wheeler's excellent study of Ruskin's varying perspectives on religion emphasizes the primacy he placed on obedience to divine law (213, 278-79). Wheeler points out that his religious views have been too often overlooked or misunderstood by the "agnostic liberalism of the twentieth-century mind" (xiv), but that "the richness and variety" of his work "can be more fully appreciated today by recovering an understanding of the religious beliefs and ideas on which much of that work is based" (xv). Though the complexity of Ruskin's religious views has been overlooked, this is not to say that the general moral tenor of his thought has been ignored, but rather selectively applied; as Rachel Teukolsky has pointed out, "[c]ontemporary scholarship on Ruskin continues [...] focusing especially on those interests that anticipate the new moral concerns of the academy. These include Ruskin's principled anxieties about the environment, gender roles, and political economy" (26). She provides a helpful summary of recent Ruskin scholarship on these issues.

were ordered by the Founder of your religion to love your neighbour as yourselves. You have founded an entire Science of Political Economy, on what you have stated to be the constant instinct of man—the desire to defraud his neighbor” (27: 94-95). The echo of “Founder” and “founded” indicates his view that the problem lay in people arrogating highest authority to themselves. Obedience to God is the crucial premise that curtails *laissez-faire* economic ideology. But it is also from this religious context that the tension emerges between Ruskin’s liberal and conservative stances. In Hanley and Maidment’s words, “Ruskin’s interventions are radically anti-capitalist, counter-revolutionary and rooted in the Christian tradition” (3).⁷ From the core of this Christian tradition, as Ruskin interprets it, emerges a two-fold model of obedience that has not yet been carefully examined.

Ruskin addresses the different types of obedience in multiple places throughout his works, but perhaps one of the most logical places to start is with the book whose title proclaims itself to be concerned with ethics, *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866).⁸ The text is written in the form of a dialogue between an “Old Lecturer” and twelve schoolgirls as Ruskin’s attempt not so much

⁷ Frost similarly examines this contradiction, writing “that the Guild was merely one manifestation of a fundamental conflict in Ruskin’s world-view,” divided between “hierarchical organicism” and “interdependent mutualism” (15). On the other hand, Frost does not engage with David M. Craig’s book *John Ruskin and the Ethics of Consumption* (2006), which compares and contrasts Ruskin’s views with those of J. S. Mill and Marx without considering the Guild, but Craig’s argument, as Judith Stoddart has pointed out in her review of the book, “works against the grain of readings that would make Ruskin’s religious roots a liability for his often progressive views of labor and working conditions” (107).

⁸ Studies of *The Ethics of the Dust* often focus on historical contextual readings of Ruskin’s views on female education and his interaction with the Winington Hall girls’ school throughout the 1860s, whose students inspired the book’s characters. See Dinah Birch’s “*The Ethics of the Dust: Ruskin’s Authorities*” (1981), which emphasizes the need Ruskin felt to find “new ways of defining and expressing the framework of authority” in connection with mythology (13); Birch’s ““What Teachers Do You Give Your Girls?’ Ruskin and Women’s Education” (2002), which similarly examines Ruskin’s teaching and the increasing emphasis he placed on “the authority of femininity” (126); Catherine Robson’s “The Stones of Childhood: Ruskin’s ‘Lost Jewels’” (2002), which reads *Ethics* as attempting to keep “a safe distance between the constituent parts of his identity, [...] the little girl and the old man, the past and the present” (45); Francis O’Gorman’s ““To See the Finger of God in the Dimensions of the Pyramid’: A New Context for Ruskin’s ‘The Ethics of the Dust’ (1866)” (2003), which surveys its scientific context and argues that *Ethics* foreshadows *Fors Clavigera* in its “literary practice” (564); and Sara Atwood’s *Ruskin’s Educational Ideals* (2011), which examines how Ruskin’s writings and methods of teaching in *The Ethics of the Dust* and in *Fors Clavigera* demonstrate his belief that “education was primarily an ethical process” (2).

to teach mineralogy (though the subject is addressed in anthropomorphic ways as crystal virtues and vices) as to introduce his central ideas to a younger audience (18: 203). In this text, Ruskin's discussion of the virtue of obedience is introduced by an explanation of the etymology of *virtue*, which he then defines as "a vital human strength, which instinctively, constantly, and without motive, does what is right" (18: 301). But the instinctive nature of this type of obedience is the end result of a process of instillation and training, which enables people to act independently of motivations based on reward and punishment. To emphasize that external motives are appropriate as a training ground but not as the end point of obedience, he also launches into a scathing critique of corrupted religion, which assumes that the externally imposed systems of reward and punishment are the only motives of ethical conduct, and that without these, people would delight in nothing but taking advantage of each other (18: 302). True virtuous obedience is not externally imposed but comes instinctively from within. Rewards and consequences are not the end goal, but the training ground, "helpful chiefly to the better state when we can act without reference to them," for "nothing is ever done so as really to please our Great Father, unless we would also have done it, though we had had no Father to know of it" (18: 302-303). Ruskin is provocatively reversing the religious narrative of obedience for the reward of salvation on which he was raised. He returns to this passage on instinctive obedience in his 1877 preface to clarify that in the most extreme cases, without the rationale of clearly expected rewards and punishments, instinctive obedience to divine law can appear blind in its trust (18: 204-205). In its apparent conflict with human rationality, instinctive obedience is a relationship that stands outside of the more easily measured type of conscious obedience to laws structured around results.

Ruskin addresses this two-fold distinction of obedience more clearly in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853). Following a lengthy critique of the “Pride of Science” (11: 46) and “Pride of State” (11: 73) exhibited in Renaissance architecture and sculpture, he delves into the third fault of the Renaissance, “Pride of System” (11: 115), which fixated on a restrictive obedience, setting up as its “first aim [...] a code of laws” that could be applied to all aspects of human thought and activity (11: 115). He admits that no readers who remember his “Lamp of Obedience” in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) would think that in thus critiquing the Renaissance’s subjection to codes of law he means to dismiss law itself (11: 116). But he distinguishes between lower and higher forms of obedience to law:

But law, so far as it can be reduced to form and system, and is not written upon the heart,—as it is, in a Divine loyalty, upon the hearts of the great hierarchies who serve and wait about the throne of the Eternal Lawgiver,—this lower and formally expressible law has [...] two objects. It is either for the definition and restraint of sin, or the guidance of simplicity; [...] But, so far as men become good and wise, and rise above the state of children, so far they become emancipated from this written law, and invested with the perfect freedom which consists in the fulness and joyfulness of compliance with a higher and unwritten law; a law so universal, so subtle, so glorious, that nothing but the heart can keep it. (11: 116)

Here Ruskin again distinguishes two types of obedience: the training ground of faith, obeying without questioning or perhaps even understanding a written code of rules, and the liberation from these written rules by voluntary, instinctive obedience to a “supreme law” that remains incommunicable by rules (11: 117). This second type of obedience could be critiqued as the mere

internalization of the authority of coded rules, the self-policing that Foucault describes as resulting from surveillance, where the observed “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (203). However, such a reading would oversimplify Ruskin’s argument, for his second type of obedience is not a mere extension of the first, but stands in distinct liberatory relation to it, a transformation that is more accurately a reorientation to a different source and type of obligation: the divine authority beyond the human that is paradoxically internally, instinctively registered.

Ruskin uses the figure of the artist to illustrate these different types of obedience. There is the artist who paints according to rules that guide him in knowing what is best to do; but “the true artist has that inspiration in him which is above all law, or rather which is continually working out such magnificent and perfect obedience to supreme law, as can in nowise be rendered by line and rule. [...] His science is inexpressibly subtle, directly taught him by his Maker, not in any wise communicable or imitable. Neither can any written or definitely observable laws enable us to do any great thing” (11: 117). Thus in *The Stones of Venice*, as in *The Ethics of the Dust*, Ruskin describes a hierarchical notion of obedience where one is trained by someone in authority to obey basic laws, but he also emphasizes that the purpose of such training is not to make people stay there, but to enable them to move past it into the realm of instinctive obedience, which is personal, liberating, and transforming, enabling great things. The Renaissance was at fault precisely because it set up the preliminary stage of obedience to rules as an end in itself without moving beyond that stage.

It is rather ironic, therefore, that in his work trying to establish a utopian society, the Guild of St. George, Ruskin would in some ways repeat this very fault for which he had criticized the Renaissance. The purpose of this Guild, as described in *Fors Clavigera* Letter 5 (May 1871), was to buy land for cultivation:

We will have no steam-engines upon it, and no railroads; we will have no untended or unthought-of creatures on it; none wretched, but the sick; none idle but the dead. We will have no liberty upon it; but instant obedience to known law, and appointed persons: no equality upon it; but recognition of every betterness that we can find, and reprobation of every worseness. (27: 96)

In the resolution for the Guild that Ruskin published in Letter 58 of *Fors* (October 1875), he again reiterates the importance of obedience, though here he makes it conditional, including the possibility of revolt. Article 7 pledges obedience to the laws of the country, which extends only “so far as such laws or commands are consistent with what I suppose to be the law of God; and when they are not, or seem in anywise to need change, I will oppose them loyally and deliberately” (28: 420). Article 8 also admits the same conditionality in relation to the Guild’s laws (28: 420). The potential for change inherent in acknowledging the laws of God as holding priority above all others expands when it is remembered that Ruskin wrote this resolution such that even “Jews and Mahometans may sign it” (28: 420). However, the actuality of such flexibility is more debatable. The Guild finally gained legal standing in 1878 (30: xxv), but it had difficulties, as Ruskin himself admitted. Though its governing articles may have included the potential for change through personal appeal to God’s laws as highest authority, that potential could be foreclosed if God’s laws were assumed to be already accurately represented by the governing authorities.

Ruskin claimed to shun the burden of commanding obedience, writing that he hated the responsibility of directing people and managing financial affairs (28: 22). Still, he felt too guilty to isolate himself with his art studies, thinking he had to do something to counter the social problems around him (27: 13), but he seems not to have reflected on how his authoritarian view

actually reproduced some aspects of those problems. E. T. Cook's introduction to the library edition volume containing the Guild's documents points to one of the reasons why its

agricultural enterprises [...] were not a practical success. It may be that they were not given a fair chance. Ruskin himself says that he did not give it, and the men who were attracted by his schemes and encouraged by his enthusiastic promises were not always of the right stuff. Some of them were, it seems, infected by "infernal notions of equality and independence" [28: 630]; others perhaps found St. George a harder taskmaster than they bargained for. (30: xxxiv)⁹

In his insistence on obedience in the Guild of St. George, Ruskin placed emphasis on the first type of obedience, seeing the Guild as a training ground for its companions. Though it can be inferred that he may have envisioned this training as ideally leading the companions to the higher type, nevertheless it did not turn out that way in practice. It could never be clear at what point someone had progressed enough to reach this stage of liberation, for, as Ruskin had already indicated, the nature of that liberation, a personal relationship with a divine source of obligation, was such as could not be fixed or definable by written, externally-imposed laws.

The problems that arose from Ruskin's insistence on obedience to masters as the enforcers of the lower law of written rules are detailed in Mark Frost's book *The Lost Companions and John Ruskin's Guild of St George: A Revisionary History* (2014). Frost connects this authoritarian nature of requiring such unquestioning obedience to Carlyle, whom Ruskin called his master (23; cf. 24: 347).¹⁰ Frost specifies the conflicting liberal and

⁹ Frost has specified that "Guild activities can be grouped under agricultural, educational, and industrial headings," and that the agricultural enterprises were not wholly the "short-lived, abortive activities of little consequence" they often were considered to be (3). Nevertheless, though there were some "undoubted achievements," the cause of the "serious failures" overall was Ruskin's "approach to leadership and class" (4).

¹⁰ In his introduction to *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin*, George Allan Cate does clarify that their relationship was more complex than one of simple imitation, for "the similarities between the two men in

conservative elements in Ruskin's project: "The Guild contained an irresolvable tension between notions of free creativity and obedience, between a desire to confront the iniquities of capitalism and the consequences of replacing them with an oppressive social order" (91). As various issues or opportunities for work arose, some companions were unsure how far to take their initiative (93), but Ruskin was no help. Influenced probably by the internal conflict over his own authority mentioned earlier,

Ruskin often abruptly disappeared, and was liable to dictatorially impose his authority after a period of unhelpful silence, or to suddenly change his mind. Most damagingly of all, his insistence on slave-like obedience from Companions meant that the energies of his working-class activists were squandered in a way that fatally undermined the potential of the Guild to pursue its core agricultural ambitions or foster the co-operative ethos that formed at least part of Ruskin's conflicted vision. (108)

In the designation of the requirement of obedience as "slave-like," unfortunate echoes highlight how unlike the actual situation for the companions, not just under Ruskin but under the variously invested Guild leaders (13), was compared to the ideal vision of liberated creativity that Ruskin champions in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853). In the chapter "The Nature of Gothic," he calls for workmen to be allowed to exercise their own imaginations in their work, even when that means the work will be done less than perfectly:

But, above all, in our dealings with the souls of other men, we are to take care how we check, by severe requirement or narrow caution, efforts which might

doctrine and attitude are great, but there are also important differences, as their letters show. Although Ruskin absorbed much of Carlyle, much of himself remained, and he never became a mere echo of his master's voice" (53). It would be useful to consider in more depth the nuances between Carlyle's and Ruskin's views of obedience.

otherwise lead to a noble issue; [...] Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, [...] failure upon failure, [...] but out comes the whole majesty of him also [...]. (10: 191-92)

Ruskin severely warns the oppressive industrial system that allows no place for individual creativity, and he admits it is little wonder why people have become antagonistic to the idea of obedience and reverence for authority, seeing how it has been abused by the upper classes (10: 194-95).¹¹ Yet he writes that in the abstract, the idea of reverent obedience is still justified: “To yield reverence to another, to hold ourselves and our likes at his disposal, is not slavery; often it is the noblest state in which a man can live in this world” (10: 195).¹² Ruskin may have been imagining such an idealized relation of obedience in the Guild of St. George, but it appears that he could not quite allow the same risk of imperfection that inevitably emerges in allowing progression beyond the rigid rules of the training ground phase of obedience. It was as if, when it came down to it, feeling the burden of expectation from those who had donated funds to the cause, he could not let go and allow the possibility of failure.

The problem that can be gleaned from Ruskin’s trouble with the Guild is partly due to his logical elision between the concept of obedience to divine law that is unwritten and inherently perceived by an individual versus obedience to a social structure purporting to represent and

¹¹ Ruskin’s anger with the upper classes for, as he saw it, disobeying the laws of God and neglecting their responsibility for just governance is registered throughout *Fors Clavigera*; see especially Letters 2, 4, 10, 22, 44, 45, 49, 55, 62, 68, and 84. Frost provides a helpful discussion of Ruskin’s frustration over the lack of support from these classes for the Guild (58-59, 91-92).

¹² It is useful to remember that Ruskin saw reverent obedience to divine law as incumbent upon every person, not as the duty of the lower classes alone; he spoke of Christ as the greatest master because he was the most obedient to divine law: “He had to learn a new manner for His new reign: and the masters of that were sent to Him—the masters of Obedience. For He had to become obedient unto Death” (27: 214; cf. Philippians 2: 8). Similarities may be traced with the ancient Greek tradition, which emphasized the need for rulers as well as ruled to be reverently obedient to divine law (Woodruff 83-84, 90-96).

enforce law divine and otherwise. But the problem is also due to the direction of movement between the two concepts; though he claimed the primacy of obeying God as the ultimate source of authority commanding love of neighbor, nevertheless in practice he placed obedience as beginning in the class-inflected training ground of written rules. Structural enforcement at this preparatory stage of obedience tends to exceed its bounds and prevent the higher stage, foreclosing reorientation to a new individually-experienced type of obedience to a source beyond the human. Despite his declaration in the articles of St. George's resolution that human laws counter to divine law are to be personally resisted, the implication is that human laws purporting to be representative of divine law are to be collectively obeyed. What are the limitations of isolating as an end in itself the idea of obedience as a societal training ground (giving rise to the type of surveillance critiqued by Foucault), while overlooking the complexity inherent in the flexible modality of obedience, which Ruskin saw, ideally if not in practice, as opening up to an affective and liberatory personal obedience toward a source of obligation irreducible to that training ground? The practical experience of the Guild highlights what is at stake: distinguishing the two types of obedience risks stalling in collective human law, foreclosing the individual relation to divine law, or claiming human law as representative of divine law. To resolve the problem, the modern secular narrative simply does away with the concept of divine law. Yet the space which the idea of divine law once filled still remains in the assumption of obligation—the mysteriously inescapable *ought*—underlying value judgments. Ignoring this constitutive space could result in an even more foreclosed situation, when human institutions stand in as the highest authority and end of obedience without acknowledging the potential for any corrective from outside of themselves. The violence of conformity increases when individually-discerned obligation from an extra-human source becomes foreclosed or completely denied in collectivized

obedience to societal structures of law, collapsing the individual into society, the space of *ought* (traditionally seen as the divine other) into the institutional totality.

This very impasse is what Levinas seeks to overcome in his ethics of alterity, witnessing to an avenue whereby obedience can be more clearly understood as beginning in a non-static, personally-experienced modality of obligation to an absolute other beyond reduction to a social organization purportedly representative of that divine other. Levinas likewise sees obedience as two-fold and non-static, but he essentially reverses Ruskin's direction: rather than starting with structured rules—traditional ethics—and then moving to a personal relation with the origin of obligation in the divine other, which direction risks being cut short, he begins with that divine other—the source of ethical responsibility that exerts its call to obey prior to rules and societal structures, which structures in turn are subordinate to that original obligation.

Levinas and Obligation to the Other

Given Levinas's experience of losing his family to the Nazis and of being himself imprisoned for four years in a labor camp, it is not hard to understand why he positions himself against a logic that fed into the abusive authority of a totalitarian state bent on eliminating otherness in the name of its own culturally-constituted morality (*Righteous* 40; cf. Wehrs and Haney 16; Robbins xv). Where Ruskin positions himself against the oppressions of nineteenth-century economic materialism, though conflicted by his Tory dislike of revolutions to the class system, Levinas stands against the twentieth-century oppressions that he saw as emerging from Western ideology's privileging of a certain type of *being*—the rational being that uses language to construct laws and ethical systems in an attempt to secure its position in an understood world. Western philosophy's conception of "the human," he writes, is "considered from the starting point of ontology as freedom, as will to power and as assuming in its totality and its finitude the

essence of being [...] Modern intelligence is that which saw, in Auschwitz, the outcome [aboutissement] of law and obedience [...] in the totalitarianisms, fascist and nonfascist, of the twentieth century” (*Of God* 47). His thought is aimed not simply at pointing out how such totalitarian obedience is wrong, but also at understanding how it is that humans can step back from such totalitarian obedience and make judgments that it is wrong. He wants to witness to a source of morality that exceeds cultural particularities, that is capable of judging them precisely because it stands outside culture and exerts ethical obligation on human beings as individuals. This ethical sense is distinctly not Kantian rationality, for it exceeds the reason that attempts to circumscribe and translate this responsibility into ethical systems. Levinas names this ethical sense the absolute other. His thought has been seen as composed of two different phases of thinking about ethics, generally contained in his two central works, *Totality and Infinity* (1961), and *Otherwise than Being* (1974). The first is where he describes at a more practical level what ethical obligation to the other looks like, how it is sustained. The second is where he describes, or more accurately bears witness to, since it exists prior to thought and language, the source of ethical obligation in the absolute other, the fact that human beings are always already morally responsible.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas begins with a critique of the Western philosophical subject, wrapped up in the self’s own thought and mirrored in totalizing state structures. He seeks to open a way of escape from the logic that reduces the other to the same, which same, the autonomous subjective self, is “egoistic, imperialistic, colonizing” (Wehrs and Haney 19; cf. *Totality* 36). The problem is how this closed self-referential circle can be opened in an ethical relation with another person without colonizing him or her, usurping uniqueness in totality (*Totality* 38). For Levinas, the ethical relationship occurs when the self comes face to face with

the other, which encounter exposes the self to “an idea of infinity” that is completely beyond the self, incomprehensible in the sense of being ungraspable, exceeding reason (41). Locating the absolute other—the sense of *ought*—as resonant in the face of the other may appear arbitrary, but Levinas sees it as a self-evident fact empirically proven any time we meet and respond to other people.¹³ Instead of emphasizing Kantian universality, he deliberately focuses on the individual person (*Righteous* 114). Coming face to face with the other places the self under ethical responsibility:

A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.

(43)

This ethics of obligation toward the other is borne out not just in the moment of facing, but in the carrying on of conversation during that facing, for in its assumption of asymmetry, the exchange of dialogue fundamentally “prevents the reconstitution of totality” (40). His locating the ethical relationship as sustained in the realm of language will have implications to be considered momentarily, but for now, it is enough to emphasize that this is an applied ethics capable of providing a specific societal model: discourse supports good works and vice versa, for the obligation to the other takes two forms, not only not to do harm, but also actively to do good for

¹³ When asked in an interview, “What would you respond to someone who said that he did not admire holiness, did not feel this call of the other, or more simply that the other left him indifferent?” Levinas replied, “I do not believe that is truly possible. It is a matter here of our first experience, the very one that constitutes us, and which is as if the ground of our existence. However indifferent one might claim to be, it is not possible to pass a face by without greeting it, or without saying to oneself, ‘What will he ask of me?’ Not only our personal life, but also all of civilization is founded upon this” (184).

the life of the other, to hold oneself at another's disposal, to respond with "generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands" (50). Thus it is not just in conversation, but in concrete generosity arising out of that conversation, that the ethical encounter is sustained without totality (Robbins 6). Conversation holds open the relationship, preventing the subject from relapsing back into the enclosed space of his or her own thought and material existence.

This ethical philosophy allows religion to be repurposed in Levinas's thought, moving from traditional conceptions of social institutionalized religion to something that consists in the individual's obligation to the other. It is through the generosity and language arising from the encounter with the other that Levinas orients this new type of religion:

The void that breaks the totality can be maintained against an inevitably totalizing and synoptic thought only if thought finds itself *faced* with an other refractory to categories. Rather than constituting a total with this other as with an object, *thought consists in speaking*. We propose to call "religion" the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality.

(*Totality* 40, italics original)

As can be seen here, Levinas thinks of religion beyond the sense of a specifically identifiable religious organization. It rather consists in the obligation to the other, in whose face resonates an infinite or "absolutely other," which he also calls God (39). Here Levinas rewrites the Western ontotheological understanding of God (*God, Death, and Time* 137). In his concept of religion and God, he differs most obviously from Ruskin, who, though he did turn away from the organization of a specific religious sect, still clearly orients his concept of obedience around a traditional idea of God as Supreme Being. In contrast, Levinas's philosophy revises both this notion of God and philosophers who responded, albeit in various ways, to this same concept;

Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger all “view God and religion under the aegis of reason that prioritizes the self-same” (Urbano 60). Levinas proposes a different focus altogether beyond the philosophical discourse of rational being, one that is manifest in the ethical obligation between people; God cannot be known in the abstract apart from the relationship with the other (*Totality* 78). For Levinas, then, the face of the other is not the same as God, but it “reverberates” the command of God, the ethical obligation of responsibility (*Righteous* 171). Ethics is located not in how humans think about God, but in how God is revealed when humans obey their ethical responsibility to each other, a responsibility that falls on them prior to all rational thought and that remains infinitely uncontained: “The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed” (*Totality* 79; cf. Minister and Murtha 1028; Urbano 72; Robbins 38). This absolute, infinite other glimpsed in the face of the other person performs a God-like function by checking the autonomous self-sufficiency of the subject and commanding the obligation of responsibility.¹⁴

Most crucially, the absolute other cannot be fixed by rational human categories. Bloechl connects its escape from rationality back to clarify Levinas’s idea of religion, writing that “the otherness of the other person is absolute; it withdraws from a relation that I, in my infinite responsibility, nonetheless move to reestablish. Ethics, in short, is the religion (from *religare*: to tie, or bind again) of a relation with what cannot enter the relation”—because it is prior to reason (84). It is not in the initial facing of the other, hearing the command of the absolute other in the

¹⁴ Badiou’s disagreement with Levinas arises from this primacy Levinas places on the divine function of the absolute other. As Badiou writes, “the ‘Altogether-Other’ [...] is quite obviously the ethical name for God. [...] To make of ethics the ultimate name of the religious as such (i.e. of that which relates [*re-lie*] to the Other under the ineffable authority of the Altogether-Other) is to distance it still more completely from all that can be gathered under the name of ‘philosophy’” (*Ethics* 23). Levinas’s focus on the idea of God, however revised from traditional ontotheological conceptions, disqualifies him from what Badiou counts as philosophical. This is hardly surprising, given Levinas’s deliberate attempt to locate ethics outside the rational logos on which philosophy depends, and given Badiou’s project of reasserting the primacy of philosophy (*Second Manifesto* 8-9).

face, but in the responding discourse and generosity, that structures of rationality enter the scene. And here arises the problem with discourse—it may be able to function as an economy within the ethical space of responsibility to the other, but it is not the *source* of that ethical responsibility. Dialogue presupposes a common language, and if the other is oppressed and cannot speak, it is no guarantee of justice (Harold xxix, 86); there must be an ethical standard or source that remains outside being, beyond rational dialogue. It is the attempt to bear witness to this source that forms Levinas’s primary aim in his later works, especially *Otherwise than Being*.¹⁵ Harold provides some helpful questions to illustrate this purpose, writing that Levinas “seeks the *condition*, rather than the result, of ethics. [...He] does not ask, ‘How are we to live?’ but rather, ‘How is it that we can be concerned with how we are to live?’ The ability to concern oneself with morality in the first place, the condition of morality” (79, italics original). Here it is that examining Levinas’s thought in light of the dilemma arising out of Ruskin’s two-fold conception of obedience enables a clearer vision of what Levinas’s thought is accomplishing, understanding obedience as *first* owed to something beyond the human, which provides a grounding whence to seek justice and prevent abuse in the realm of externalized, socially-constructed laws and obligations.

Reimagining the Anarchic Relation of Obedience

The foregoing examination of Ruskin’s and Levinas’s views highlights obedience not as an end in itself, but as a *process* of obligation that the obedient person undergoes. As has been shown, Ruskin distinguishes, in theory, two types of obedience: a preparatory obedience to written rules or laws, perhaps not even understood, but followed without question, and a

¹⁵ Harold explicates Derrida’s critique in “Violence and Metaphysics” to show how it influenced Levinas’s change in emphasis (100-104): Levinas’s later works still keep the model of dialogue sustaining the ethical encounter when facing the other, but much more emphasis is placed on how the source of ethical obligation escapes all language and is thus beyond being.

liberated obedience to ineffable, individually discerned “supreme law” (11: 117). Levinas also distinguishes different stages of obedience, yet for him, the process is reversed; first comes the inexplicable relation to the absolute other’s command, which constitutes the individual as obligated prior to all rational codification of law (*Righteous* 175). To illustrate the nature of this obedience required by the absolute other, he draws on an analogy from the Bible when the Israelites are bound by God, through Moses, to obey the Torah or Law before understanding it. He comments on this story, “Not only does acceptance precede examination but practice precedes adherence. It is as if the alternatives liberty-coercion were not the final ones, as if it were possible to go beyond the notions of coercion and adherence due to coercion by formulating a ‘practice’ prior to voluntary adherence” (“Temptation” 40). To reverse the process and insist on understanding before obeying shirks the very nature of ethical responsibility—the pre-rational call of the other (“Temptation” 48; cf. Purcell 41; Harold 197). Hence obedience is a constituting feature of the human before it can be channeled into specific laws; in Levinas’s words, “Obedience precedes any hearing of the command,” which is then found out “anachronously” (*Otherwise* 148). For Levinas, this obedience is unquestioning subjection to that always present source of moral law, which is “anarchic” in that it stands outside all questioning, all codified ethics; it is the “saying” before it becomes the “said” (102, 37).

Obedience is thus a relationship in which human beings already find themselves, but this constitutive state of obligation cannot be dwelt in as its own end, for at the very moment of its appearing, it moves the subject into relation with the other, inasmuch as it is manifest in the face of the other, at which point discourse, generosity, ethical action is commanded. For Levinas, the absolute other founds an affective relationship: “This responsibility for the other is the grounding moment of love” (*Righteous* 133). More precisely, this love is “charity,” because it does not

expect a reward (*Righteous* 190; cf. Harold 91). This description of the affective relationship arising from the command of the absolute other shows that the command does not reduce the subject to slavery: “this heteronomy is not servitude or bondage” (*Righteous* 172; cf. Purcell 42). Slavery would be analogous to what Ruskin critiqued in the Renaissance and in the modern factory, and what, unfortunately, in his insistence on human masters guiding dependent subjects through codified obedience, appears to have resulted for some Guild members. But Levinas’s emphasis on charity resonates with Ruskin’s witness to the primary command of divine law being to love others (27: 94-95). Levinas is describing both how that command to love the other comes to human beings as well as what that love looks like. Far from slavery, Levinas emphasizes the unexpectedness and fluidity at play in this moral obligation to the absolute other remembered in obedience toward the other: “Beyond the disclosure and exhibition of the known alternate, surprised and surprising, an enormous presence and the withdrawal of this presence” (*Otherwise* 90; cf. Purcell 43). Levinas sees the subject as responsible beyond particular situations in which duties can be discharged: he thinks the source of moral obligation as distinct from the reification of human institutions, the ethical experience of being commanded and obeying that command which forms the subject, which initiates him or her in a movement or process of obedience that does not hold obedience as an end in itself but as the beginning of all else, as the transformative means of ethical responsibility for the other, a responsibility that can never be ended (*Otherwise* 161). Thus it can be said that Levinas’s concept of obedience is twofold in the sense that when one obeys the absolute call of responsibility, also called love or the good, witnessed through the face of the other, one inevitably moves from the site of inexplicable obligation into the politically-charged field of site-specific action for the other—the realm where written laws can emerge.

The initial responsibility is instinctive in that one feels it before one rationally comprehends it: “the Good is not presented to freedom; it has chosen me before I have chosen it” (*Otherwise* 11). This pre-rational element is essential because a system of morality chosen from the condition of rational freedom alone would be paradoxically arbitrary, no more grounded than any other system’s rationale, “a reduction [that] refuses the irreducible anarchy of responsibility for another” (76). It must be experienced to feel that this obligation of responsibility is no mere “slave’s alienation,” but that it allows freedom to be redefined in the wake of this anarchy of original obligation (105). The endless increase of responsibility paradoxically allows liberation from “my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist Subject” (112). As Levinas writes, again in the context of the Israelites’ acceptance of the Torah, the “condition [...] of hostage is an essential modality of freedom—its primary modality—and not an empirical accident of a freedom always remaining above it all” (“Temptation” 50). Harold explains in even more concrete terms the nature of this liberation, distinguishing it from its counterfeits: “The freedom to avoid the event of the encounter with the other is not true freedom [...] The inability to escape one’s responsibilities by retreating to a private sphere is a freedom of meaningful spontaneity; it is a positive movement that has meaning outside of me, above my sterile giving of meaning” (215; cf. Purcell 40). Obedience, thus theorized as a transformative, liberatory process, stands opposite to Ruskin’s first type of training obedience, though strongly resonating with the description of his theoretical second type of obedience, “the perfect freedom which consists in the fulness and joyfulness of compliance with a higher and unwritten law” (11: 116). But where Ruskin sees this second type as the end result following a preparatory obedience to written law, Levinas sees it as the condition prior to all written law.

Both Ruskin and Levinas envision obedience as starting in incomprehension, the obedience of faith without prior knowledge, which is what makes Levinas's ethics not dependent on the logos of specific philosophies or politics. Ruskin sees this incomprehension as proportionate to one's "childishness or simplicity" needing to be trained by rules instituted by wiser teachers (11: 116), while Levinas, though acknowledging that it "shocks logic and can pass for blind faith or the naivete [*sic*] of childish trust," nevertheless specifies that it "is a perfectly adult effort" to accept in responsible action toward the other the obligation of the absolute other, which obligation is necessary for any great thing or "inspired act" ("Temptation" 42). It is in obeying that understanding comes. Both envision this trusting obedience as leading the one who is summoned by it to a new relationship, a new positioning within the condition of obligation, but where Ruskin sees this new relationship theoretically as liberation from written, externally-imposed laws into voluntary, instinctive obedience to a personally-discerned supreme law, Levinas sees this new relationship as moving from one of anarchic original responsibility to one in which the obedient is able ethically to understand written law, to engage the realm of social justice. Obligation is a condition existing outside of and prior to empirical situations, which positioning enables ethical judgment and action in those situations.

For Levinas, obedience to the original call of the absolute other takes the form of response to the other through whom it is manifest, which can then inform written laws, programs of justice, and societal institutions. On the other hand, to begin with structured, rational rules, where Ruskin thought his guild members should begin, gives rise to the abuse of authority, the complacency of a system to its blind spots and oppressive silencing. It is in the relationship to the absolute other, the obligation that is prior to all rules, that ethics is grounded. Levinas writes that "it is starting from the relation to the face, from me before the face of the other, that we can

speak of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the state” (*Righteous* 167). Ethics provides a position from which to judge politics, but both are necessary because facing the other is never, in practice, between two people only; there is always another person to whom one is obligated, and in devoting attention to one, another is inevitably neglected. Hence the emergence of discourse, generosity, human laws, justice (*Righteous* 115-16, 194; *Entre Nous* 166-67). Levinas explains that “justice itself is born of charity. They can seem alien when they are presented as successive stages; in reality, they are inseparable and simultaneous, unless one is on a desert island, without humanity, without a third. [...] charity is impossible without justice, and [...] justice is warped without charity” (*Righteous* 168-69, 181). Thus it betrays the very nature of obedience and freezes its fluidity if institutions attempt to set themselves up as the source of obedience, obscuring its extra-human source that paradoxically constitutes the human being as morally obligated on an individual level. The difficulties that Ruskin encountered in attempting to institutionalize obedience in the Guild of St. George, despite its articles gesturing to the subversive possibility of appealing to an extra-human authority, demonstrate the consequences of such reification. To some degree, he did understand the problems of institutionalization when he admitted that moral change had to come from an interior, personal location first, writing that “all effectual advancement towards this true felicity of the human race must be by individual, not public effort” (17: 111). Justice must begin at the individual level, for “only in a remote degree does it depend on external matters, and least of all on forms of government” (27: 14). Yet he still tried to enforce the hierarchical government of the Guild, maintaining a class-inflected model of obedience, which external approach unsurprisingly did not work.

Such would probably be the fate of any project to institutionally fix and mandate an ethics of obligation to the other. Still, Levinas’s theory has been critiqued as a vague, apolitical

morality that betrays the transformative potential of politically-oriented ethics. His non-specifically-political stance can, from one angle, be seen as a weakness in his thought, making it utopian, idealistic, difficult to translate into definite moral laws or concrete justice for the other that goes beyond feeling.¹⁶ Harold has attempted to think through the implications of Levinas's ethics for politics, acknowledging that his thought can be "a spur" but never "a ground" for particular organizations, because Levinas's ethics concern precisely the type of relationship "beyond the limits of consciousness and language," where "the very attempt to render the beyond being intelligible distorts it" (210, xv). Original obligation cannot be authentically translated, but only remembered by the individual facing the other. Nevertheless, perhaps this seemingly apolitical ethics is the very perspective needed to address the problem considered at the beginning of this paper, the inevitable presence of the *ought* in ethical argument. An ethical system beginning solely in situational argumentation, constructed rules, rational evaluation of political tradition—the totalizing, self-legitimizing logos—is vulnerable to committing "the worst violence" if its reasons are constructed carefully enough in a way that ignores its own constructedness (Harold xix, 78, 200-201). Harold quotes philosopher Vincent Descombes, who points out the illogic of "critical hypocrisy," a mode which

takes the form of an incessant denunciation of superstition and of tyrannical acts.

Yesterday's enlightened Philosopher and today's ideological critic both denounce the abuses they observe around them. Yet there can only be *abuses* where there is also *legitimacy*....Critical hypocrisy uncovers abuses everywhere, but fails to

¹⁶ Harold provides a useful summary of this critique as articulated by authors such as Paul Ricoeur and Gilliam Rose, then argues, "There is no need for Levinas to effect a 'transition between ethics and politics' because for him they are never separated in the first place"—the former presupposing the latter—"except that he insists that holiness can and should interrupt substantive politics" (206).

provide even the slightest clue as to what a corresponding legitimate practice might be. (200-201, italics original)

These words are quite strong, but they illustrate the point; building from this quote, Harold shows how Levinas underscores the need to acknowledge an ethical source originating beyond specific politics if any legitimate practice is to be coherently maintained, writing, “Only from beyond liberalism can our commitment to liberalism be sustained; we can only be liberals if we know that liberalism is wrong, only if [we] can see its blind spots. Otherwise we fall into a complacency that can only result from blindness to certain forms of violence” (200). The only sure ground for ethical judgment is to acknowledge that there is no sure rational ground; ethics originates in anarchy.

What is most difficult but also rewarding about Levinas’s thought for ethical discussion, therefore, is that it cannot be reduced to politics alone, but rather relies on a primordial, anarchic ethical responsibility that constitutes humanity and is by its very nature something that cannot be prescribed or guaranteed by rules. Levinas shows that there is no ultimate point of closure, but that an attentiveness to the fact of being obligated—for him, to the absolute other—has the most potential to enable eschewing the violence of stasis and the blindness of thinking one has arrived at justice in one particular ideology or institution over another. My examination of the different ways in which Ruskin and Levinas think through the ethical concept of obedience is intended to demonstrate its complexity and show how the ethical questions that are implicated in obedience as a modality of relation need to be more deliberately acknowledged and considered. Analyzing the contradictory way in which Ruskin thought of obedience allows us to see the problematic nature of the authoritarian deployment of obedience in a more precise way; analyzing the way in which Levinas highlights obedience as prior to and presupposed in ethics allows us to understand

more clearly why it is that we can step back and judge authoritarian oppression as problematic. Rethinking the complexity of obedience in ethics through these two different authors has shown how Levinas's thought can be seen as a corrective to the institutional hierarchical notion of obedience that took primacy in Ruskin's Guild and that is in danger of being implicitly repeated in political discourse that does not begin in anarchic ethics or acknowledge the *ought* as constitutive of humanity beyond human rationality, irreducible to institutions, hence the only position from which to critique and change institutions. Much work remains to be done in considering the complexities and the implications of obedience in other philosophical, ethical, and literary thought, but joining these writers in discourse may have provided at least one step toward sharpening the ethical context in which the concept of obedience needs to be situated.

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