Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation

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I hope to address here ethical obligations that are global in character and that emerge both at a distance and within relations of proximity. The two questions that concern me are at first quite different from one another. The first is whether any of us have the capacity or inclination to respond ethically to suffering at a distance and what makes that ethical encounter possible, when it does take place. The second is what it means for our ethical obligations when we are up against another person or group, find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose, and must respond to solicitations in languages we may not understand or even wish to understand. This happens, for instance, at the border of several contested states but also in various moments of geographical proximity—what we might call “up againstness”—the result of populations living in conditions of unwilled adjacency, the result of forced emigration or the redrawing of the boundaries of a nation-state. Of course, presumptions about farness and nearness are already there in most of the accounts of ethics that we know. There are communitarians who do not mind the local, provisional, and sometimes nationalist character of the communities to which they consider themselves ethnically bound and whose specific community norms are treated as ethically binding. They valorize nearness as a condition for encountering and
knowing the other and so tend to figure ethical relations as binding upon those whose face we can see, whose name we can know and pronounce, those we can already recognize, whose form and face are familiar. It is often assumed that proximity imposes certain immediate demands for honoring principles of bodily integrity, nonviolence, and territorial or property rights claims. And yet, it seems to me that something different is happening when one part of the globe rises in moral outrage against actions and events that happen in another part of the globe, a form of moral outrage that does not depend upon a shared language or a common life grounded in physical proximity. In such cases, we are seeing and enacting the very activity of bonds of solidarity that emerge across space and time.

These are times when, in spite of ourselves and quite apart from any intentional act, we are nevertheless solicited by images of distant suffering in ways that compel our concern and move us to act, that is, to voice our objection and register our resistance to such violence through concrete political means. In this way, we might say that we do not merely or only receive information from the media on the basis of which we, as individuals, then decide to do or not to do anything. We do not only consume, and we are not only paralyzed by the surfeit of images. Sometimes, not always, the images that are imposed upon us operate as an ethical solicitation. I want for the moment to call attention to this formulation, since I am trying to underscore that something impinges upon us, without our being able to anticipate or prepare for it in advance, and this means that we are in such moments affronted by something that is beyond our will, not of our making, that comes to us from the outside, as an imposition but also as an ethical demand. I want to suggest that these are ethical obligations that do not require our consent, and neither are they the result of contracts or agreements into which any of us have deliberately entered.

To make this view plain, I want to suggest as a point of departure that images and accounts of war suffering are a particular form of ethical solicitation, one that compels us to negotiate questions of proximity and distance. They implicitly formulate ethical quandaries: Is what is happening so far from me that I can bear no responsibility for it? Is what is happening so close to me that I cannot bear having to take responsibility for it? If I myself did not make this suffering, am I still in some other sense responsible to it? How do we approach these questions? Although what I have to offer here will not be focused on photographs or images, I want to suggest that the ethical solicitation that we encounter in, say, the photograph of war...
suffering brings up larger questions about ethical obligation. After all, we do not always choose to see the images of war, of violence and death, and we can reject them vehemently. After all, who put this image in my face, and what are they trying to make me feel, or what are they trying to do to me? Indeed, we might understand this as the structural paranoia of the image, the way it is bound up with an indefinite form of address. But even the paranoid is being solicited or attests to the fact that he or she is being addressed in some way. Is there a Levinasian undercurrent in this moment of having to listen to the voice of someone we never chose to hear or to see an image that we never elected to see?

Such images may appear on our screen, or we may flash upon them (or they may flash upon us) as we walk down the street by the kiosks where newspapers are sold. We can click on a site as a deliberate act in order to get the news, but that does not mean that we are actually prepared for what we see and does not even mean that we have chosen to expose ourselves to what impinges upon us visually or aurally. We understand what it means to be overloaded or overwhelmed with sensory images, but are we also ethically overwhelmed at such instances, and would it be a problem if we were not? Susan Sontag made the point that war photography overwhelms and paralyzes us at the same time, and she actively wondered whether we might still rely on the image to incite a political deliberation on—and resistance to—the unjust character of state violence and war. But is it possible that we might be overwhelmed and unparalyzed—and can we understand that as the working of an ethical obligation upon our sensibilities? Indeed, this word, sensibility, is the one that Levinas reserves for that region of responsiveness that precedes the ego, a kind of response that therefore is and is not my response. To say it is my response is to lodge the ego as its source, but what we are trying to talk about is a form of responsiveness that implies a dispossession of the egological. With this in mind, I return to my question: Must we, in fact, be overwhelmed to some degree in order to have motive for action? We only act when we are moved to act, and we are moved by something that affects us from the outside, from elsewhere, from the lives of others, imposing a surfeit that we act from and upon. According to such a view of ethical obligation, receptivity is not only a precondition for action but one of its constituent features. Media names any mode of presentation that relays to us some version of reality from the outside; it operates by means of a series of foreclosures that make possible what we might call its message and which impinges on us, by
which I mean both the foreclosure—what is edited out, what is outside the margins—and what is presented. When we find ourselves in the midst of a responsive action of some kind, we are usually responding to what we have not chosen to see (what is barred from our seeing but also what is given in the domain of visual appearance). It may seem like something of a leap, but I want to suggest that this very brief account of what is unchosen in the force of the image articulates something about ethical obligations that impose themselves upon us without our consent. So if we are open to this point, though we have reason enough not to accept it fully, it would seem to suggest that consent is not a sufficient ground for delimiting the global obligations that form our responsibility. In fact, responsibility may well be implicated in a vast domain of the nonconsensual.

My second point, however, is to contest the notion that ethical obligations emerge only in the contexts of established communities that are gathered within borders, are unified by the same language, and/or constitute a people or a nation. Obligations to those who are far away as well as to those who are proximate cross linguistic and national boundaries and are only possible by virtue of visual or linguistic translations, which include temporal and spatial dislocations. These kinds of circuits confound any communitarian basis for delimiting the global obligations that we have. So my proposal is that neither consent nor communitarianism will justify or delimit the range of obligations that I seek to address here. I think this is probably an experience we have in relation to the media when it makes proximate suffering at a distance and makes what is proximate appear very far away. My own thesis is that the ethical demands that emerge through the global circuits in these times depend on this limited but necessary reversibility of proximity and distance. Indeed, I want to suggest that certain bonds are actually wrought through this very reversibility and the impasse through which it is constituted. This very reversibility dead-ends, as it were, in the problem of corporeal locatedness, since no matter how fully transported through media we might be, we are also emphatically not. So if we are filmed on the street, the body and the street transport to some degree, acquiring potentially global dimensions; and yet that report and transport are only intelligible on the assumption that some dimensions of the time and space of that bodily location cannot be transported, are left there, or persist there and have an obdurate thereness. But I will return to this problem of the body down the line, since I have no other choice, and perhaps none of us really do.
For now, I want only to suggest in a fairly elementary way that if I am only bound to those who are close to me, already familiar, then my ethics are invariably parochial, communitarian, and exclusionary. If I am only bound to those who are “human” in the abstract, then I avert every effort to translate culturally between my own situation and that of others. If I am only bound to those who suffer at a distance, but never those who are close to me, then I evacuate my situation in an effort to secure the distance that allows me to entertain ethical feeling and even feel myself to be ethical. But ethical relations are mediated—and I use that word deliberately here, invoking a reading of Hegel in the midst of the digital age. And this means that questions of location are confounded such that what is happening “there” also happens in some sense “here,” and if what is happening “there” depends on the event being registered in several “elsewheres,” then it would seem that the ethical claim of the event takes place always in a “here” and “there” that are in some ways reversible; but that reversibility finds its limit in the fact that the body cannot be relieved of its locatedness, its exposure, through its mediated transport. In one sense, the event is emphatically local, since it is precisely the people there whose bodies are on the line. But if those bodies on the line are not registered elsewhere, there is no global response, and also, no global form of ethical recognition and connection, and so something of the reality of the event is lost. It is not just that one discrete population views another through certain media moments but that such a response makes evident a form of global connectedness, however provisional, with those whose lives and actions are registered in this way. In short, to be unprepared for the media image that overwhelms can lead not to paralysis but to a situation of (a) being moved, and so acting precisely by virtue of being acted upon, and (b) being at once there and here, and in different ways, accepting and negotiating the multilocality and cross-temporality of ethical connections we might rightly call global.

Can we, then, turn to some versions of ethical philosophy in order to reformulate what it means to register an ethical demand during these times that is reducible neither to consent nor to established agreement and that takes place outside of established community bonds? I will, then, consider briefly some arguments by Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt on these vexed relations that hold among ethics, proximity, and distance. My choice of two thinkers who are in part formed through Jewish intellectual traditions (Levinas) and Jewish historical situations (Arendt) is not
accidental. In a separate project that casts its shadow here, I am trying to articulate a version of cohabitation that follows from the account of ethical obligation I am describing; both of these thinkers offer views that are both illuminating and problematic for this task. I hope to make matters more concrete by turning to Palestine/Israel toward the end of my remarks, mainly to suggest a set of Jewish views on cohabitation that demand a departure from communitarianism, even Jewish communitarianism, and that may serve as a critical alternative during this time when the state of Israel seeks to secure its claim to represent Jewishness. Luckily for you, and perhaps for me as well, that last concern will not be the center of my remarks here, even though, in all fairness, it does constitute the central argument of my recent work.

**Levinas**

There are two dissonant dimensions of Levinas’s ethical philosophy. On the one hand, there is the importance of the category of proximity to his idea of ethical relations. Indeed, it seems that the ways that others act upon us, without our will, constitute the occasion of an ethical appeal or solicitation. This means that we are acted on, and solicited, ethically, prior to any clear sense of choice. To be impinged upon by another assumes a bodily proximity, and if it is the “face” that acts upon us, then we are to some extent affected and claimed by that “face” at the same time. On the other hand, our ethical obligations extend to those who are not proximate in any physical sense and do not have to be part of a recognizable community to which we both belong. Indeed, for Levinas, those who act upon us are clearly other to us; it is precisely not by virtue of their sameness that we are bound to them.

Of course, Levinas sustained some contradictory views on this question of the otherness of the Other who makes an ethical claim on me: he clearly affirmed forms of nationalism, especially Israeli nationalism, and also held to the notion that only within a Judeo-Christian tradition were ethical relations possible. But let us, for the moment, read him against himself, or read him for the political possibilities he opens up, even those he never intended. Levinas’s position allows us the following conclusion: that the set of ethical values by which one population is bound to another in no way depends on those two populations bearing similar marks of
national, cultural, religious, racial belonging. It is interesting that Levinas insisted that we are bound to those we do not know, and even those we did not choose, could never have chosen, and that these obligations are, strictly speaking, *precontractual*. And yet, he was the one who claimed in an interview that the Palestinian had no face and that he only meant to extend ethical obligations to those who were bound together by his version of Judeo-Christian and classical Greek origins. In some ways, he gave us the very principle that he betrayed. His failure directly contradicts his formulation of the demand to be ethically responsive to those who exceed our immediate sphere of belonging but to whom we nevertheless belong, regardless of any question of what we choose or by what contracts we are bound or what established forms of cultural belonging are available.

Of course, this raises the question of how there can be an ethical relation to those who cannot appear within the horizon of ethics, who are not persons or are not considered to be the kinds of beings with whom one can or must enter into an ethical relation. Is it possible to take the ethical philosophy formulated there and deploy it against the very exclusionary assumptions by which it is sometimes supported? Can we, in other words, use Levinas against himself to help in the articulation of a global ethics that would extend beyond the religious and cultural communities that he saw as its necessary condition and limit?

Let us take as an example his argument that ethical relations are asymmetrical. In his work, the Other has priority over me. What does that concretely mean? Does the other not have the same obligation toward me? Why should I be obligated toward another who does not reciprocate in the same way toward me? For Levinas, reciprocity cannot be the basis of ethics, since ethics is not a bargain: It cannot be the case that my ethical relation to another is contingent on his or her ethical relation to me, since that would make that ethical relation less than absolute and binding; and it would establish my self-preservation as a distinct and bounded sort of being as more primary than any relation I have to another. For Levinas, no ethics can be derived from egoism; indeed, egoism is the defeat of ethics itself.

I take distance from Levinas here, since though I agree in the refutation of the primacy of self-preservation for ethical thinking, I want to insist upon a certain intertwining between that other life, all those other lives, and my own—one that is irreducible to national belonging or communitarian affiliation. In my view (which is surely not mine alone) the life of the other, the life that is *not* our own, is also our life, since whatever sense “our”
life has is derived precisely from this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world. In this way there are surely others distinct from me whose ethical claim upon me is irreducible to an egoistic calculation on my part. But that is because we are, however distinct, also bound to one another and to living processes that exceed human form. And this is not always a happy or felicitous experience. To find that one’s life is also the life of others, even as this life is distinct and must be distinct, means that one’s boundary is at once a limit and a site of adjacency, a mode of spatial and temporal nearness and even boundedness. Moreover, the bounded and living appearance of the body is the condition of being exposed to the other, exposed to solicitation, seduction, passion, injury, exposed in ways that sustain us but also in ways that can destroy us. In this sense the exposure of the body points to its precariousness. At the same time, for Levinas, this precarious and corporeal being is responsible for the life of the other, which means that no matter how much one fears for one’s own life, preserving the life of the other is paramount. If only the Israeli army felt this way! Indeed, this is a form of responsibility that is not easy while undergoing a felt sense of precarity. Precarity names both the necessity and the difficulty of ethics.

What is the relation between precarity and vulnerability? It is surely hard to feel at once vulnerable to destruction by the other and yet responsible for the other, and readers of Levinas object all the time to his formulation that we are, all of us, in some sense responsible for that which persecutes us. He does not mean that we bring about our persecution—not at all. Rather, “persecution” is the strange and disconcerting name that Levinas gives for an ethical demand that imposes itself upon us against our will. We are, despite ourselves, open to this imposition, and though it overrides our will, it shows us that the claims that others make upon us are part of our very sensibility, our receptivity, and our answerability. We are, in other words, called upon, and this is only possible because we are in some sense vulnerable to claims that we cannot anticipate in advance and for which there is no adequate preparation. For Levinas, there is no other way to understand the ethical reality; ethical obligation not only depends upon our vulnerability to the claims of others but establishes us as creatures who are fundamentally defined by that ethical relation.

This ethical relation is not a virtue that I have or exercise; it is prior to any individual sense of self. It is not as discrete individuals that we honor this ethical relation. I am already bound to you, and this is what it means
to be the self I am, receptive to you in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. This is also, clearly, the condition of my injurability as well, and in this way my answerability and my injurability are bound up with one another. In other words, you may frighten me and threaten me, but my obligation to you must remain firm.

This relation precedes individuation, and when I act ethically, I am undone as a bounded being. I come apart. I find that I am my relation to the “you” whose life I seek to preserve, and without that relation, this “I” makes no sense and has lost its mooring in this ethics that is always prior to the ontology of the ego. Another way to put this point is that the “I” becomes undone in its ethical relation to the “you,” which means that there is a very specific mode of being dispossessed that makes ethical rationality possible. If I possess myself too firmly or too rigidly, I cannot be in an ethical relation. The ethical relation means ceding a certain egological perspective for one that is structured fundamentally by a mode of address: You call upon me, and I answer. But if I answer, it was only because I was already answerable; that is, this susceptibility and vulnerability constitutes me at the most fundamental level and is there, we might say, prior to any deliberate decision to answer the call. In other words, one has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness.

**Arendt**

Most scholars would want to keep any consideration of Emmanuel Levinas separate from any analysis of Hannah Arendt: He is a philosopher of ethics, drawing on religious traditions, and emphasizes the ethical importance of passivity and receptivity; she is a social and political philosopher, adamantly secular, who emphasizes time and again the political value of action. Why bring a discussion of Levinas together with one regarding Arendt? Both Levinas and Arendt take issue with the classically liberal conception of individualism, that is, the idea that individuals knowingly enter into certain contracts and their obligation follows from having deliberately and volitionally entered into agreements with one another. This view assumes that we are only responsible for those relations, codified by agreements, into which we have knowingly and volitionally entered. And Arendt disputes this view. Indeed, it was the substance of the argument that she made
against Eichmann. He thought he could choose which populations should live and die, and in this sense he thought he could choose with whom to cohabit the earth. What he failed to understand, according to Arendt, is that no one has the prerogative to choose with whom to cohabit the earth. We can choose in some ways how to live and where, and in local ways we can choose with whom to live. But if we were to decide with whom to cohabit the earth, we would be deciding which portion of humanity may live and which may die. If that choice is barred to us, that means that we are under an obligation to live with those who already exist and that any choice about who may or may not live is always a genocidal practice; and though we cannot dispute that genocide has happened, and happens still, we are wrong to think that freedom in any ethical sense is ever compatible with the freedom to commit genocide. The unchosen character of earthly cohabitation is, for Arendt, the condition of our very existence as ethical and political beings. Hence, to exercise that prerogative of genocide is not only to destroy political conditions of personhood but to destroy freedom itself, understood not as an individual act but as a plural action. Without that plurality against which we cannot choose, we have no freedom and, therefore, no choice. This means that there is an unchosen condition of freedom and that in being free, we affirm something about what is unchosen for us. If freedom seeks to exceed that unfreedom that is its condition, then we destroy plurality and we jeopardize, in her view, our status as persons, considered as *Zoon politikon.* This was one argument that Arendt made about why the death penalty was justified for Eichmann—a point I made two years ago in my lecture at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy meeting: In her view, Eichmann had already destroyed himself by not realizing that his own life was bound to those he destroyed, and individual life makes no sense, has no reality, outside of the social and political framework in which all lives are equally valued.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt argued that Eichmann and his superiors failed to realize that the heterogeneity of the earth’s population is an irreversible condition of social and political life itself. So, Arendt’s accusation against Eichmann bespeaks a firm conviction that none of us may exercise such a prerogative, that those with whom we cohabit the earth are given to us, prior to choice and so prior to any social or political contracts we might enter through deliberation and volition. In Eichmann’s case, the effort to choose with whom to cohabit the earth was an explicit effort to annihilate some part of that population—Jews, gypsies, homosexuals,
communists, the disabled, and the ill, among others—and so the exercise of freedom upon which he insisted was genocide. Not only is this choice an attack on cohabitation as a precondition of political life in Arendt’s view, but it commits us to the following proposition: **we must devise institutions and policies that actively preserve and affirm the nonchosen character of open-ended and plural cohabitation.** Not only do we live with those we never chose and with whom we may feel no immediate sense of social belonging, but we are also obligated to preserve those lives and the open-ended plurality that is the global population.

Although Arendt would doubtless dispute my view, I think what she has offered is an ethical view of cohabitation that serves as a guideline for particular forms of politics. In this sense, concrete political norms and policies emerge from the unchosen character of these modes of cohabitation. The necessity of cohabiting the earth is a principle that, in her philosophy, must guide the actions and policies of any neighborhood, community, or nation. The decision to live in one community or another is surely justified as long as it does not imply that those who live outside the community do not deserve to live. In other words, every communitarian ground for belonging is only justifiable on the condition that it is subordinate to a non-communitarian opposition to genocide. The way I read this, every inhabitant who belongs to a community belongs also to the earth—a notion she clearly takes from Heidegger—and this implies a commitment not only to every other inhabitant of that earth but, we can surely add, to sustaining the earth itself. And with this last proviso, I seek to offer an ecological supplement to Arendt’s anthropocentrism.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt speaks not only for the Jews but for any and every other minority who would be expelled from habitation on the earth by another group. The one implies the other, and the “speaking for” universalizes the founding interdiction even as it does not override the plurality whose life it seeks to protect. One reason Arendt refuses to separate the Jews from the other so-called nations persecuted by the Nazis is that she is arguing in the name of a plurality coextensive with human life in any and all its cultural forms. At the same time, her judgment of Eichmann is one that emerges precisely from a historical situation of a diasporic Jew who was herself a refugee from Nazi Germany who objected to the Israeli courts representing only a specific nation when the crime committed was a crime against humanity. Trying Eichmann in the Israeli courts meant that only the Jewish victims of the genocide were represented, an injustice, in her view, when
there were many other groups annihilated and displaced in accord with the Nazi policy formulated and implemented by Eichmann and his cohorts.

This same notion of unchosen cohabitation implied not only the irreversibly plural or heterogeneous character of the earth’s population, and an obligation to safeguard that plurality, but also a commitment to an equal right to inhabit the earth and so a commitment to equality as well. These two dimensions of her discussion took specific historical form in her argument against the idea of Israel as a state based on principles of Jewish sovereignty and for a federated Palestine in the late 1940s. The political conception of plurality for which she fought was, in her view, implicit in the American Revolution and led her to refuse to accept exclusively national, racial, or religious grounds for citizenship. Moreover, she objected to the founding of any state that required the expulsion of its inhabitants and the production of a new refugee class, especially when such a state invoked the rights of refugees to legitimate its founding.

Arendt’s normative views are these: there is no one part of the population that can claim the earth for itself, no community or nation-state or regional unit, no clan, no party, and no race. This means that unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence, the basis of her critique of nationalism, the obligation to live on the earth and in a polity that establishes equality for a population necessarily and irreversibly heterogeneous. Indeed, unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation serve as well as the basis of our obligations not to destroy any part of the human population and to outlaw genocide as a crime against humanity but also to invest institutions with the demand to seek to make all lives livable and equally so. Thus, from unchosen cohabitation, Arendt derives notions of universality and equality that commit us to institutions that seek to sustain human lives without regarding some part of the population as socially dead, as redundant, or as intrinsically unworthy of life and therefore ungrievable.

Arendt’s views on cohabitation, federated authority, equality, and universality elaborated from the 1940s through the 1960s stood in stark contrast to those who were defending nationalist forms of Jewish sovereignty, differential classifications for Jewish and non-Jewish citizens, military policies to uproot Palestinians from their lands, and efforts to establish a Jewish demographic majority for the state. It is so often taught that Israel became a historical and ethical necessity for the Jews during and after the Nazi genocide and that anyone who questions the founding principles of the Jewish
state shows an extraordinary insensitivity to the plight of the Jews; but there were Jewish thinkers and political activists at the time, including Arendt, Martin Buber, Hans Kohn, and Judah Magnus, who thought that among the most important lessons of the Nazi genocide was an opposition to illegitimate state violence, to any state formation that sought to give electoral priority and citizenship to one race or religion, and that nation-states ought to be internationally barred from dispossessioning whole populations who fail to fit the purified idea of the nation.

For those who extrapolated principles of justice from the historical experience of internment and dispossession, the political aim is to extend equality regardless of cultural background or formation, across languages and religions, to those none of us ever chose (or did not recognize that we chose) and with whom we have an enduring obligation to find a way to live. For whoever “we” are, we are also those who were never chosen, who emerge on this earth without everyone’s consent and who belong, from the start, to a wider population and a sustainable earth. And this condition, paradoxically, yields the radical potential for new modes of sociality and politics beyond the avid and wretched bonds formed through settler colonialism and expulsion. We are all, in this sense, the unchosen, but we are nevertheless unchosen together. It is not uninteresting to note that Arendt, herself a Jew and refugee, understood her obligation not to belong to the “chosen people” but, rather, to the unchosen and to make mixed community precisely among those whose existence implies a right to exist and to lead a livable life.

Alternative Jewishness, Precarious Life

I have offered you two perspectives derived in different ways from Jewishness. Levinas was himself a self-avowed Jewish thinker and a Zionist, deriving his account of responsibility from an understanding of the commandments, how they act upon us, and how they compel us ethically. And Arendt, though surely not religious, nevertheless took her position as a Jewish refugee from World War II as a point of departure for thinking about genocide and statelessness and for the plural conditions of political life.

Of course, neither Levinas nor Arendt is easy to work with in this struggle. As with Levinas, there are parts of Arendt’s position that are
clearly racist (she objected, for instance, to Arab Jews, thus identifying proper Jewishness as European, and saw Jewishness restrictively within those terms), and yet some of what she writes is still a resource for thinking about the current global obligations to oppose and resist genocide, the reproduction of stateless populations, and the importance of struggling for an open-ended conception of plurality.

Arendt’s Euro-American framework was clearly limited, and yet another limitation comes to mind if we try to understand the relationship of precarity to practices of cohabitation (the needs of the body relegated to the private sphere). Precarity only makes sense if we are able to identify bodily dependency and need, hunger and the need for shelter, the vulnerability to injury and destruction, forms of social trust that let us live and thrive, and the passions linked to our very persistence as clearly political issues. If Arendt thought that such matters had to be relegated to the private realm, Levinas understood the importance of vulnerability but failed to really link vulnerability to a politics of the body. Although Levinas seems to presuppose a body impinged upon, he does not give it an explicit place in his ethical philosophy. And though Arendt theorizes the problem of the body, of the located body, the speaking body emerging into the “space of appearance” as part of any account of political action, she is not quite willing to affirm a politics that struggles to overcome inequalities in food distribution, that affirms rights of housing, and that targets inequalities in the sphere of reproductive labor.

In my view, some ethical claims emerge from bodily life and perhaps all ethical claims presuppose a bodily life, understood as injurable, one that is not restrictively human. After all, the life that is worth preserving and safeguarding, who should be protected from murder (Levinas) and genocide (Arendt), is connected to, and dependent upon, nonhuman life in essential ways; this follows from the idea of the human animal, as Derrida has articulated it, which becomes a different point of departure for thinking about politics. If we try to understand in concrete terms what it means to commit ourselves to preserving the life of the other, we are invariably confronted with the bodily conditions of life and so, a commitment not only to the other’s corporeal persistence but to all those environmental conditions that make life livable.

In the so-called private sphere delineated in Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, we find the question of needs, the reproduction of the material conditions of life, and the problems of transience, reproduction, and
death alike—everything that pertains to precarious life. The possibility of whole populations being annihilated through either genocidal policies or systemic negligence follows not only from the fact that there are those who believe that they can decide whom they will inhabit the earth with but because such thinking presupposes a disavowal of an irreducible fact of politics: the vulnerability to destruction by others that follows from a condition of precarity in all modes of political and social interdependency. We can make this into a broad existential claim, namely, that everyone is precarious, and this follows from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions. As much as I am making such a claim, I am also making another, namely, that our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions. So as soon as the existential claim is articulated in its specificity, it ceases to be existential. And since it must be articulated in its specificity, it was never existential. In this sense, precarity is indissociable from that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs. Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency.

Whether explicitly stated or not, every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity, one that depends on dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable and so, in that sense, already lost in part or in whole, and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance. My point is not to rehabilitate humanism but, rather, to struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity. No one escapes the precarious dimension of social life—it is, we might say, the joint of our nonfoundation. And we cannot understand cohabitation without understanding that a generalized precarity obligates us to oppose genocide and to sustain life on egalitarian terms. Perhaps this feature of our lives can serve as the basis for the rights of protection against genocide, whether through deliberate or negligent means. After all, even though our interdependency constitutes us as more than thinking beings, indeed as social and embodied, vulnerable and passionate, our
thinking gets nowhere without the presupposition of the interdependent and sustaining conditions of life.

We might think that interdependency is a happy or promising notion, but it is often the condition for territorial wars and forms of state violence. Indeed, I am not sure that we have yet been able to think about the unmanageability of dependency at the level of politics—to what fear, panic, repulsion, violence, and domination it can lead. It is true that I am trying to struggle toward an affirmation of interdependency in what I have offered here, but I am trying to underscore just how difficult it is to struggle for social and political forms that are committed to fostering a sustainable interdependency on egalitarian terms. When any of us are affected by the sufferings of others, it is not only that we put ourselves in their place or that they usurp our own place; perhaps it is the moment in which a certain chiasmic link comes to the fore and I become somehow implicated in lives that are clearly not the same as my own. And this happens even when we do not know the names of those who make their appeal to us or when we struggle to pronounce the name or to speak in a language we have never learned. At their best, some media representations of suffering at a distance compel us to give up our more narrow communitarian ties and to respond, sometimes in spite of ourselves, sometimes even against our will, to a perceived injustice. Such presentations can bring the fate of others near or make it seem very far away, and yet, the kinds of ethical demands that emerge through the media in these times depend on this reversibility of proximity and distance. Indeed, I want to suggest that certain bonds are actually wrought through this very reversibility, however incomplete it is. And we might find ways of understanding the interdependency that characterizes cohabitation precisely as these bonds. For if I am here and there, I am also not ever fully there, and even if I am here, I am always more than fully here. Is there a way to understand this reversibility as limited by bodily time and space in such a way that the other is not radically other, and I am not radically over here as an I, but the link, the joint, is chiasmic and only and always partly reversible and partly not?

There are, as we know, antagonistic ties, wretched bonds, raging and mournful modes of connectedness. In those cases living with others on adjacent lands or on contested or colonized lands produces aggression and hostility in the midst of that cohabitation. The mode of unchosen
cohabitation that belongs to the colonized is surely not the same as the
tonotion of a democratic plurality established on grounds of equality. But
they both have their mode of wretched attachment and adjacency.¹

It seems to me that even in situations of antagonistic and unchosen
modes of cohabitation, certain ethical obligations emerge. First, since we
do not choose with whom to cohabit the earth, we have to honor those
obligations to preserve the lives of those we may not love, those we may
never love, do not know, and did not choose. Second, these obligations
emerge from the social conditions of political life, not from any agreement
we have made or from any deliberate choice. And yet, these very social
conditions of livable life are precisely those that have to be achieved. We
cannot rely on them as presuppositions that will guarantee our good life
together. On the contrary, they supply the ideals toward which we must
struggle, which involve a passage through the problem of violence. Because
we are bound to realize these conditions, we are also bound to one another,
in passionate and fearful alliance, often in spite of ourselves, but ultimately
for ourselves, for a “we” who is constantly in the making. Third,
these conditions imply equality, as Arendt tells us, but also an exposure
to precarity (a point derived from Levinas), which leads us to understand
a global obligation imposed upon us to find political and economic forms
that minimize precarity and establish economic political equality. Those
forms of cohabitation characterized by equality and minimized precarity
become the goal to be achieved by any struggle against subjugation and
exploitation but also the goals that start to be achieved in the practices of
alliance that assemble across distances to achieve those very goals. We
struggle in, from, and against precarity. Thus, it is not from pervasive love
for humanity or a pure desire for peace that we strive to live together. We
live together because we have no choice, and though we sometimes rail
against that unchosen condition, we remain obligated to struggle to affirm
the ultimate value of that unchosen social world, an affirmation that is not
quite a choice, a struggle that makes itself known and felt precisely when
we exercise freedom in a way that is necessarily committed to the equal
value of lives. We can be alive or dead to the sufferings of others—they can
be dead or alive to us. But it is only when we understand that what happens
there also happens here, and that “here” is already an elsewhere, and neces-
sarily so, that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global
connections in ways that let us know the transport and the constraint of
what we might still call ethics.
NOTES

1. See Levinas’s remarks that the Palestinians have no face (and hence, their human vulnerability can be the ground for no obligation not to kill) in Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and Politics,” in The Levinas Reader, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 289. See also Levinas’s remarks about the “asiatic hordes” who threaten the ethical basis of Judeo-Christian culture in Emmanuel Levinas, “Jewish Thought Today,” in Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 165. This is more fully discussed in my Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995), 90–96.
