

LORENZO URBANO

RESPONSIBILITY, RELATIONALITY, CARE
A CONVERSATION WITH JARRETT ZIGON

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A cura di
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Prospettive etnografiche su responsabilità e rapporti di prossimità

a cura di Lorenzo Urbano

LORENZO URBANO, <i>Premessa</i>	197
LORENZO URBANO, <i>Dall'individuale al collettivo e ritorno. Prospettive antropologiche su responsabilità e cura</i>	203
SILVIA CIRILLO, «La verità è che non sono una brava persona». <i>Lavoro domestico, famiglie etiopi e figlie responsabili</i>	231
NICOLETTA CASTAGNA, <i>Responsabilità e rischio gen-etico. La gestione dell'eredità biologica nella malattia di Huntington</i>	251
GLORIA FRISONE, <i>Economia morale della vittima e malattia di Alzheimer: la relazione malato-caregiver tra responsabilità di cura e processi di soggettivazione</i>	271
LORENZO BETTI – FRANCESCA GIRARDI, <i>Verso la promozione della salute comunitaria: spazi di azione e limiti nella costruzione di una responsabilità condivisa in una periferia urbana</i>	295
VALENTINA PORCELLANA, <i>Interdipendenze. Cura, responsabilità, bene comune tra montagna e pianura</i>	315
NICOLA MARTELLOZZO, <i>Chi ha fatto cadere il cielo? La responsabilità distribuita del disastro Vaia in Val di Fiemme</i>	337
LORENZO URBANO, <i>Responsibility, relationality, care. A conversation with Jarrett Zigon</i>	357
Gli Autori	369

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LORENZO URBANO

In copertina: EGON SCHIELE, *La morte e la fanciulla*, 1915, olio su tela. Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna.

LORENZO URBANO

RESPONSIBILITY, RELATIONALITY, CARE.
A CONVERSATION WITH JARRETT ZIGON

As the contributions of this issue have repeatedly shown, the themes of responsibility, care, and responsibility-as-care have had a significant resonance in the so-called ‘ethical turn’ in anthropology. A plurality of authors in the field of the anthropology of morality and ethics have spoken at length about responsibility and care, foregrounding the importance of these concepts – and discourses and practices around them – in the moral subjectivities and ethical lives of the people we encounter in the field. Among the numerous perspectives on responsibility and care, I find Jarrett Zigon’s particularly significant for the reflections we have presented in this issue. As I’ve noted elsewhere,¹ the way in which Zigon defines his own perspective on an anthropology of morality and ethics is eminently relational: since the creation of the concept of *moral breakdown* and its related *ethical demand* (the latter drawn from Emmanuel Levinas),² morality and ethics are situated in relationships, in the encounter with an other – in the *responsibility* towards an other. Zigon’s later works focus more and more on relationality as ontologically constituent of ethics. Particularly interesting for this issue (and our reflections on responsibility) is the idea of *attunement*, a process, constant but never ending, of progressively ‘getting close(r) to each other’, as a fundamental condition for moral experience, and as a basis for the rethinking of responsibility-as-care.³ His most recent book, *How is it between us?*, is a more structured attempt at formulating a *relational ethics*, from the point of view of anthropology (and of the anthropology of eth-

¹ L. URBANO, *Una svolta etica? Prospettive e criticità dell’ethical turn*, «Lares», LXXXVI, 1, 2020, pp. 107-136: 129.

² J. ZIGON, *Moral breakdown and the ethical demand. A framework for an anthropology of moralities*, «Anthropological Theory», VII, 2, 2007, pp. 131-150.

³ ID., *Attunement and Fidelity. Two Ontological Conditions for Morally Being-in-the-World*, «Ethos», XLII, 1, 2014, pp. 16-30; ID., *Attunement: Rethinking Responsibility*, in S. TRNKA – C. TRUNDLE (eds.), *Competing Responsibilities. The Ethics and Politics of Contemporary Life*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 49-69.

ics) but not just as an analytic framework.⁴ The following short conversation is my own attempt to explore aspects of responsibility-as-care through the lens of Zigon's ideas and concepts – to further develop a theoretical background in which to understand the supposed shift in meaning and usage of 'responsibility'.

Lorenzo Urbano [L.U.]: Let's start from the premise of this special issue. Contemporary discourses on responsibility – at least, the ones talked about in social science – seemed to focus primarily on *personal* responsibility, shifting the attention from structural dimensions of social problems (such as sickness, or poverty, or marginalization) to the singular, individual trajectories of subjects. This is how, for example, institutions often talk about drug use and addiction, as is clear in much of your research: emphasizing the *choice* – morally wrong, self-destructive, criminal – of drug use, and placing users in the situation of being coerced to quit, and also having to usually take on the *responsibility* of rehabilitation themselves. However, it also seems that, especially in the last twenty years or so, a new articulation of the idea of responsibility has coagulated in both institutional morality and public discourses on morality: an idea of responsibility that gives more weight to the relational meaning of the 'response' inherent in the concept, and that frames 'taking responsibility' as an act of care.

Where I think this shift is most visible is in the way public discussion of environmental issues are framed: there is talk about efficiency and waste, about market incentives for renewable energy, but a significant portion of the discourse on the environment as a responsibility towards future generations. In other words, as 'taking care' of the world we leave after we're gone. Another significant example might be the so-called 'Responsible Research and Innovation' approach, particularly popular in EU institutions, that purports to rewrite the rules of scientific research and technological innovation in cooperation with a plurality of stakeholders, and not just institutional actors. Again, the key claim is that scientists have a 'duty' of care towards people impacted by the results of research and innovation – and, more in general, that science should be 'for' society at large.

Even though, surely, other factors are at play, the emergence of these discourses in itself seems significant. Responsibility (and its conceptual companion, responsibilization) seems to involve not just subjects – or, rather, individuals – by and for themselves, but also the collective. People are 'responsible' for their own (in)action in front of the entire social body. And the way they are seen as responsible is, in a large part, collective, societal, even structural. Is this a significant shift in the meaning of responsibility, or

⁴ Id., *How Is It Between Us? Relational Ethics and Care for the World*, London, HAU Books, 2023.

is it only another way of talking about personal responsibility, in different contexts but with the same individual (and individualizing) perspective?

Jarrett Zigon [J.Z.]: This is a really important observation. Certainly, we see a significant shift in the way in which the word is used and the consequences of that use. I'm not certain, though, that we have a shift in the meaning of the concept. We'll get to this point. But let me say first that honestly, I'm a bit ambivalent about my response to this shift. On the one hand, I welcome it in that I see this from the perspective of a much longer emergence of this conception of responsibility as respond-ability. The important moment here is the publication of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*⁵ and the way in which thinkers within the broadly understood phenomenological-hermeneutic-existentialist tradition took on his thought in thinking ethics – I'm thinking of, for example, Derrida and his ethics of responsibility and hospitality,⁶ or Simon Critchley's concern for our response to the infinite demand,⁷ or Lisa Guenther's notion of the gift of ethics as a transitive response.⁸

This has also been central to the way in which phenomenologically-inspired anthropologists have contributed to the anthropology of ethics – for example, in the work of Cheryl Mattingly and Jason Throop, and some philosophers who have also contributed to this literature like Rasmus Dyring and Thomas Schwarz Wentzer.⁹ In my own work, I have articulated this notion of responsibility as respond-ability in terms of attunement, and this runs throughout my oeuvre more or less explicitly and finds its most sophisticated articulation in my recent book *How is it between us?*. So, in some sense this isn't exactly new theoretically. It has been there as a counter-concept to the more dominant neoliberal conception of responsibility for over a half-century. To the extent that this responsive notion of responsibility is finding its way into non-phenomenological texts I take to be a happy devel-

⁵ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969.

⁶ Cfr. J. DERRIDA, *Given Time. I. Counterfeit Money*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992; ID., *The Gift of Death*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996; ID. – A. DUFOURMANTELLE, *Of Hospitality*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000.

⁷ S. CRITCHLEY, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London, Verso, 2007.

⁸ L. GUENTHER, *The Gift of the Other. Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2006.

⁹ C. MATTINGLY, *Moral Laboratories. Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014; C.J. THROOP, *Suffering and Sentiment. Exploring the Vicissitudes of Experience and Pain in Yap*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010; C. MATTINGLY – R. DYRING – M. LOUW – T.S. WENTZER (eds.), *Moral Engines. Exploring the Ethical Drives in Human Life*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2018.

opment, and as an aside, yet another example of how the most interesting concepts in theory today mostly had their origins within the phenomenological-hermeneutic-existentialist tradition.

But I'm not certain how happy I should be, really. For there is a sense that this notion of responsibility as respond-ability – and particularly the way in which it is articulated in institutional and public discourses, as you point out – is simply a shift in disciplinary mechanisms of control and normative policing of behavior. To be sure, the dominant reign of neoliberally-inspired individual responsibility seems to be on the wane – though let's not be too certain yet. But is it simply being replaced by what we might call a 'progressive' disciplinary movement through which every one of our actions is evaluated in terms of some pre-established 'social justice' norm? Remember, individual responsibility was conceived as the neoliberal normative mechanism that would ensure that a non-social society and non-communal community would be ordered. I think we see a very similar move with this 'progressive' conception of responsive responsibility whereby each one of us are constantly under the obligation of a very (very) narrow set of pre-established norms. Society and community, then, remains an obligation to be made via control and under the threat of shame. Again, this is the social constituted through the disciplinary and normative activity of individuals. In this sense, then, this isn't much of a change from neoliberalism – perhaps we could call it neoliberal 'progressivism'.

So, as you see, I'm uncertain. And my own intellectual trajectory leads me to this uncertainty: my theoretical commitments to a phenomenological-hermeneutic-existential tradition leads me to welcome this development; my ethnographic and research experience in Russia and, thus, an understanding of its history, leads me to be very wary of how a notion of social or communal responsibility can be easily and terrifyingly abused.

L.U.: Talking about ethnographic experience brings into focus another dimension of this supposed shift in the meanings and uses of the concept of responsibility, that centers on situated relationality. It could be argued that this site of responsibility-as-care – concerning the ways in which this idea is articulated in everyday practices – is the one that's most pertinent to anthropology, and specifically to an anthropology of moralities and ethics. In the process of understanding this dimension of responsibility, I find that the concept of *attunement* that you have developed in a few different publications is particularly useful.

In your 2017 essay *Attunement: Rethinking Responsibility*, you contrast the «closed normalization of responsibility» (as responsabilization) with the opening of a possibility space for worldbuilding that characterizes a position of attunement. However, it seems to me that taking seriously the semantic (and, thus, practical) shift of responsibility towards care would bring us closer to attunement. Without necessarily having to invoke Levinas, that

(as you note in the essay) brings its own problems if we want to talk about mutuality and reciprocal responsibility, a perspective like Annemarie Mol's in *The Logic of Care* convincingly shows, I think, an example of care that's articulated as a sort of hermeneutic process, a getting 'close' without ever getting 'there'.¹⁰ The cases of chronic disease Mol explores are interesting in this sense: moving the goal from 'health' to 'a good life' radically alters the entire process, since what can be considered 'a good life' is often nebulous and never given once and for all. Thus, care has to become something that «makes space for what is not possible», as Mol writes.

However, I'd argue that the condition for this kind of care is a feeling of responsibility on the part of the caring subject. I struggle to 'make space' for new care practices *because* I have a duty, an obligation, towards someone who needs care. Chronic disease is a cogent example because it so often requires a shifting of positions between subjects, or new negotiations according to a change in the condition of the person who's ill. Even when care is professionalized, chronicity, I'd argue, requires a reframing of the patient-doctor relationship that doesn't simply weigh the patient down with the responsabilization of their own health – it does that, but also charges the doctor with being a more actively present actor in the entire care process. Similarly, in harm reduction there is, as you note in *Attunement*, a process of responsabilization of the drug user; but it seems to me that this doesn't negate the necessity for a hermeneutic process of 'getting closer' on the part of healthcare workers, of 'meeting them where they're at'. How can we understand these sites of responsibility-as-care, acknowledging both the constraints (institutional, political, moral) and the struggles to move in-between the interstitial spaces inevitably left by those constraints?

J.Z.: I'm glad you framed the question this way. Since writing that *Attunement* essay in 2017 I've tried to work more closely with the thought of Levinas and have done so in a way to develop it in a more social manner. Of course, one of the longstanding criticisms of Levinas is the one-way responsibility one has for an other; his thought seems to be outside of any social relation. And yet, in *Totality and Infinity* he is very clear that ethics as he articulates it is the basis of sociality. So, my most recent book *How is it between us?* is an attempt to articulate this sociality or relationality of ethics. I begin that book with the observation that if in Levinasian terms I have infinite responsibility toward the other, then I am also an other to the other, who, therefore, must have infinite responsibility toward me. This being so, what would *this* ethics – this relational ethics – of responsibility be like? It is this question that I address in *How is it between us?* and articulate in rela-

¹⁰ A. MOL, *The Logic of Care*, London, Routledge, 2008.

tion to such things as post-truth, algorithmic society and justice, and living through a climate crisis.

The subtitle of the book is *Relational Ethics and Care for the World*. And it is here that we can see that the ethics of mutual (but not totalizing) responsibility that we have for one another gives way to a kind of care. Importantly, we need to be careful with care, as your question suggests. In the anthropological literature there are some important critiques of the care regimes that have come to dominate our neoliberal worlds – I’m thinking here of the fantastic work of people like Miriam Ticktin and Lisa Stevenson.¹¹ But in a way, these critiques were foreshadowed in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, where he makes a distinction between care as something like jumping in and jumping ahead. Now, Heidegger is very critical of the first – care as jumping in – and his critique is very similar to that made by anthropologists – that care in this sense is simply a matter of taking over for the other and giving them the kind of care that the carer deems appropriate. This form of care erases the other, takes away their freedom of being and becoming, and is, therefore, a form of domination. In Levinasian terms, it turns the Other into the Same.

Fine, this is an important critique to be made. But that doesn’t mean that we have no responsibility to care. Remember, for Heidegger the essence of being human is what he called the care-structure, so to be human is to care – to care for other humans, for nonhuman beings, for the world. So, the question becomes how best to care. He argues that we must become the kind of ethical beings who care in the second way I named above – care as jumping ahead. What does this mean? Simply put, we care for the other not by imposing a regime of care onto them but – as Heidegger put it – by clearing a space for the other. So as to avoid all of the metaphysical jargon that would normally come along with an explanation of this, let’s simply say that this form of care as clearing a space for the other means something like creating the possibilities for the other to both receive care from another person and to care for themselves on their own terms. Put another way, it is a form of care that allows the receiver of care to thrive and become their own possibilities rather than have those possibilities limited by the imposition of a normalized form of care. This is what I think harm reduction at its best offers.

L.U.: I want to briefly go back to your first answer. As you noted, responsibility-as-care isn’t necessarily opposed to the (neoliberal) notion of personal responsibility. Rather, the way it’s often framed, it could be argued that responsibility-as-care is a specific articulation of personal respon-

¹¹ M. TICKTIN, *Casualties of Care. Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011; L. STEVENSON, *Life Beside Itself. Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014.

sibility – a different way of normatively prescribing individual behavior. If we go back to some of the examples given above, the coexistence of the two different meanings (or maybe dimensions) can be evident from a shift in the point of view adopted. The responsibility-as-care towards the environment, the effort to ‘take care’ of the planet we leave behind, can easily be inverted into the personal responsibility of individuals to reduce their carbon footprint, or to ‘reduce reuse recycle’. The responsibility-as-care of scientific research to account for the concrete needs of the people impacted by such research can easily be inverted into the personal responsibility of scientists take a wider range of factors into consideration in the course of their work. In both cases, it would be relatively simple to argue both positions, and would be difficult to neatly define the border between the two dimensions. If care is an obligation that has to be carried out by someone, it’d seem that someone has to be ‘personally responsible’ of carrying out such an obligation.

This isn’t just a semantic problem: falling back into personal responsibility means also falling back into the individualization of social problems. We don’t need structural change to combat the climate crisis, we need to be more responsible with our waste or energy usage. We don’t need structural change to the way we do research and innovation, we need to ask scientists and technologists to give a more accurate account of the way they work. Yet, it seems to me that this articulation of personal responsibility (connected to responsibility-as-care) and the more traditionally neoliberal articulation of ‘picking up after yourself’ don’t neatly map onto each other. Is there actually a space of non-intersection between the two, and if there is, how can we identify it as such?

J.Z.: Yes, this is what I was trying to get at in response to your first question. It seems to me that there is a real danger of slippage between these two conceptions of responsibility and how they play out in ordinary everyday life. This is especially so in the way in which what you are calling responsibility-as-care is mobilized for certain kinds of so-called ‘progressive’ social causes/political movements today. There’s really hardly anything progressive about these at all. Most of them are simply neoliberalism by other means. Precisely as you put it: the demand is no longer to have personal responsibility by caring for yourself (e.g., stop smoking! drink responsibly!) but rather to have personal responsibility by caring for others/the world (e.g., don’t take a plane! capture your carbon!). You can see the similarity in the consequences of the breach: with old school neoliberal personal responsibility the failure to, for example, stop smoking could lead to the increase of health insurance bills or the exclusion from certain public spaces; in the new ‘progressive’ neoliberal version, failure leads to higher ticket prices or exclusion via social media cancel culture. The logic is the

same – become responsible or be punished! The only real difference, perhaps, is where the punishment comes from.

But this doesn't mean that all forms of responsibility-as-care are neoliberal, it's just that we remain stuck within the iron cage of neoliberalism despite claims otherwise. We have only just begun the work of escape. Part of that work is creative hermeneutic rereading of past thought. This is why I find Heidegger so compelling. Yes, he joined the Nazi party and he was a pretty serious asshole besides. And yet, he wrote a book that among other things argued that the essential structure of being human is care – as I said earlier, care for the other human, care for nonhuman beings, and care for the world, and, importantly, care for the planet. Put another way, care is not what one does, rather care is what one is. The most important question is, then, how do we become what we are? That is, how do we become the kind of beings that *are* care?

L.U.: Intertwined with this last question is the issue of responsibility in connection with agency. Agency is a concept that is widely used in anthropology (and in the social sciences in general), and yet has also come under critical scrutiny for some of its baked-in assumptions. I'm thinking, for example, of James Laidlaw's 2010 essay *Agency and Responsibility: Perhaps You Can Have Too Much of a Good Thing*.¹² Here, Laidlaw argues for a wider conception of agency than simply «structurally significant action» and instead draws on Actor-Network Theory to define agency as being in a causal relationship with another entity, be it human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. Laidlaw argues that in this perspective, agency is not «an inherent quality» of individual subjects, but an effect of «situation[s] in which people may find themselves», created by «attributions of responsibility».

Clearly, Laidlaw is working from a 'personal responsibility' point of view – given that he explicitly talks about subjects (agents) being held responsible for events to which they are connected. However, I'm wondering if this rethinking of agency might be of relevance for responsibility-as-care. Going a bit wider than a strict ANT perspective (something that Laidlaw already does), we might say that what is posited here is a form of constitutive relationality: agents are defined by their capacity to enter into any kind of relationship in which they can act upon, or influence, each other. Agency is in this relationship. Is responsibility also in this relationship? Again, going back to Mol's logic of care, if care is an opening up of possibilities, a process that's constantly reshaped, maybe we shouldn't constrain ourselves to thinking about it only in terms of structurally significant action. How can

¹² L. LAIDLAW, *Agency and Responsibility: Perhaps You Can Have Too Much of a Good Thing*, in M. LAMBEK (ed.), *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2010, pp. 143-164.

we talk about responsibility-as-care beyond the strictly intentional, beyond discrete and individuated action, and as something diffused in a particular way of existing relationally, of being-with?

J.Z.: This is a perfect example of why I said above that we need to do a creative hermeneutic rereading of past thought. Or in the examples you offer, perhaps it would be better to say a reading. You've stumbled upon one of my pet peeves: the way in which some pretty basic arguments and positions from the phenomenological-hermeneutic-existential tradition have been recycled by much contemporary social thought as if original. Now, I don't want to say anything about the authors you brought up – I have no idea what they've read and who their influences are – so let's just generously assume that they know that what they are writing was already articulated by this tradition. But what is abundantly clear is that many of their readers do not. How could they? When the works of this tradition are not cited and the tradition itself has been badly misunderstood and wrongly taught as being a humanistic tradition focused on the subject, too often this tradition is simply dismissed. This is bad scholarship.

The fact is, how you described responsibility and agency in your question is extremely similar to the way in which Heidegger wrote about attunement and world (for example, I urge your readers to go and read the sections of *Being and Time* where Heidegger describes what he means by world and perhaps notice how closely it resembles what is now called a network by ANT), or how Merleau-Ponty wrote about relational knotting and intertwining, or how Levinas wrote about responsibility as responsivity, or how Gadamer wrote about the hermeneutic relationship of all existence, and so on.¹³

So, you see, it's not a coincidence that your question begins and ends with two words that are nearly synonymous with the phenomenological-hermeneutic-existential tradition – «intertwining» and «being-with». This tradition is so baked into our contemporary social and anthropological theory and thought and most of us simply don't know it. But to try to answer your question in a very self-referential way, it is precisely this notion of responsibility-as-care as beyond intentionality, as beyond discrete action of an individual agent, and diffused among various existents of a situation that I articulate in the book *How is it between us?* – but I call it attunement.

L.U.: Finally, I want to go back to a more general perspective. In your latest book, *How is it between us?*, you underscore the need for a relational

¹³ M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York, Humanities Press, 1962; ID., *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968; E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, cit.; H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989.

ethics, and for the surpassing of the language of ‘traditional’ moral philosophy, with concepts such as right, good, dignity, respect, as they are ‘fundamentally nonrelational’ and so is the ontology they express. An anthropology of ethics is in the position to not only redefine some of the key concepts through which we talk about and understand our ethical lives, but to do so with an eye to the granularity and complexity in which they are concretely lived. Responsibility is, without a doubt, one of those ‘old’ concepts. However, it is also fundamentally relational, in all its plural articulations. Is it a concept that can be reformulated to better answer the need for a relational ethics, if not foundationally at least as a heuristics for the ethical lives we encounter in the field? Or are its ‘conceptual proclivities’ too limiting for its usefulness to be significant for an anthropology of ethics?

J.Z.: The book is really trying to set out an agenda for a future anthropology of ethics as a foundation for a future ethics of the world. What do I mean by that? As you indicate, I argue that the dominant three traditional ethical theories or what I call the «Big Three» – virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism – are exhausted. They simply don’t speak to our worlds today. In our contemporary nihilistic times what is most needed is the creation of a new ethical theory adequate to the worlds we inhabit. I argue that the best possibility for this is a creative reading of the phenomenological-hermeneutic-existential tradition via socio-cultural anthropology. This is what the book both argues and shows how to do.

Part of this argument is that the traditional vocabulary of the «Big Three» is also exhausted, and that the concepts of this vocabulary are too wrapped up in a substance ontology that leads to, for example, the thought of agency in terms of individual actors. Responsibility is just one of these concepts. But this doesn’t mean that the concept of responsibility isn’t indicative of a real phenomenon that we all experience. It’s just that the history of this concept no longer allows us to use it in any way that doesn’t ultimately slip back into a substance ontological articulation of independent agents acting over and against other entities – this conceptual historical ‘determinism’, if you will, is what I call conceptual proclivity in my book *Disappointment*.¹⁴ My argument is that no amount of ‘rethinking’ of a concept – one of the favorite activities of many academics today – will get us out of this proclivity. The concepts are stuck and we are stuck to them every time we use them, no matter how hard we ‘rethink’. So, rather than ‘rethink’ we much create anew.

This concept creation has been my central theoretical task over the course of my career – from moral breakdown to dwelling to attunement –

¹⁴ J. ZIGON, *Disappointment: Towards a Critical Hermeneutics of Worldbuilding*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2018.

these are all ways to articulate ethical and moral phenomena that I believe we all experience with new concepts that are more adequate to the relationality of existence. So, yes, I absolutely agree that 'responsibility' is essential for being an ethical being, but the concept of responsibility is simply inadequate to this existential experience (by which I mean existing as any existent whatsoever – human or otherwise). So, the task is to create new concepts and to articulate new descriptions of this fundamental respond-ability – responsiveness – of existence as relational. This is what I've done with attunement, which is a central concept to the relational ethics I articulate in *How is it between us?*. Ultimately, then, I think the anthropology of ethics will only become a successful project when it stops recycling and projecting versions of the «Big Three» onto ethnographic data, and begins creating a new ethical conceptual repertoire adequate to the contemporary relational condition of our worlds.

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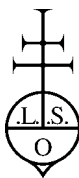
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