

# Toward an “Ethics of Serendipity”: Disrupting Normative Ethical Discourses in Organizations

Human Resource Development Review

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/1534484318796321

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## Abstract

Although most ethics development programs favor cognitive, individual, and top-down approaches, our article discusses, using the illustrative example of Volvo Group’s CreaLab, the cohabitation of multiples ethical discourses in organizations and implications for human resource development (HRD). We introduce the concept of the *ethics of serendipity* resulting from the ongoing dialogue and confrontation between three ethical discourses that we came up with building on Levinas’ work: The *Being I* discourse, the *Being with* discourse, and the discourse of the *Call of the Other*. The ethics of serendipity, thus, appear as a compromise that results from dissatisfaction with the traditional power dynamics of the *Being I* discourse, the desire to do something together illustrated in the *Being with* discourse, and the irresistible *Call of the Other*. Overall, this article answers a call for more social and experiential approaches to ethics in HRD.

## Keywords

ethics, critical management studies, philosophical foundations, Levinas

Over the past 30 years, developing an ethical workplace has been a growing concern for most organizations (Weber, 2015). Be it for legal, economic, or more humanist reasons, organizations have attempted to raise employees’ awareness of ethical issues

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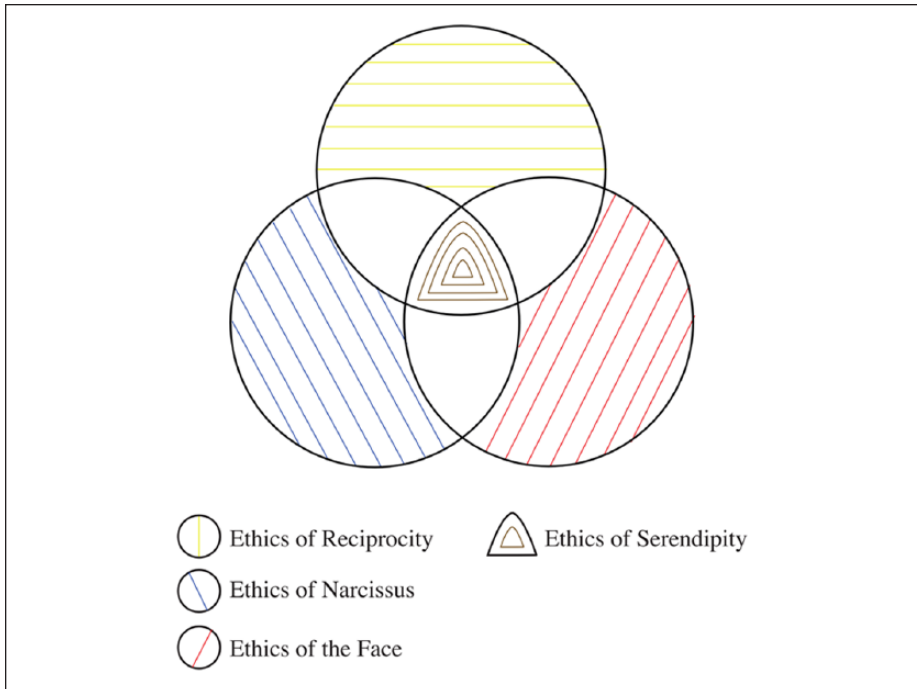
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occurring in the workplace and provide guidance to ethical decision making. Despite increasing initiatives, “presence of unethical behavior continues to plague the global business community and its impact is seen as having an even more devastating impact than ever before” (Weber, 2015, p. 27). From sensational headlines to everyday employee life, ethics development remains an open issue; and, this might have to do with how ethics development is approached—via top-down formal ethics programs targeted toward compliance. In such coercive approaches, individuals are passive recipients to ethical issues portrayed out there, independent of a real embodied person experiencing them (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014), and their resolution as the application of predefined imposed frameworks. Such an objectivist approach to ethics and ethics development (Foote & Ruona, 2008) conveys an abstract, rational, and individual perspective (Mercier & Deslandes, 2017; Wray-Bliss, 2009), denying the subjective, intersubjective, emotional, and contextual dimension of ethics (Parmar, 2014; Schwartz, 2016; Sonenshein, 2007). It overlooks the possibility for ethics to be “at play” (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014, p. 783) when expressed through altruistic behaviors aside and independent from organizationally defined processes (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ardichvili, 2013; Courpasson & Clegg, 2012; Pullen & Rhodes, 2014).

Indeed, alternative conceptions of ethics and ethics development exist that challenge such traditional top-down, asituational, and a-emotional (Bevan & Corvellec, 2007; Hancock, 2008; Pullen & Rhodes, 2014) mainstream organizational approaches to ethics. They acknowledge and embrace the alterity of each individual, the potential exposition to power relationships, and denial of the person as such. Furthermore, they discuss the nature of ethical relationships that allows for taking into account the alterity and corporeality of the subject (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014).

In acknowledging the potential multiple approaches (Foote & Ruona, 2008; Martineau, Johnson, & Pauchant, 2017; Weaver, Trevinõ, & Cochran, 1999) and discourses on ethics in organizations, the objective of our conceptual article is to discuss their cohabitation in the light of Levinas’ work that stands as an alternative philosophical tradition to the Western, essentially controlling, perspective. We indeed introduce the concept of *ethics of serendipity* as resulting from the ongoing dialogue and confrontation between different ethical discourses already at play in organizations. More precisely, by using the illustrative example of the ethical experience of employees who decided to launch an alternative creative space (The CreaLab) in their organization (Volvo Group), we contrast three ethical discourses building on Levinas’s work. The ethics of serendipity, as displayed in Figure 1, appear as the encounter between a *Being I* discourse, a *Being with* discourse, and a *Being called* discourse. The ethics of serendipity, thus, stand as a compromise that results from dissatisfaction with traditional power dynamics of the *Being I* discourse, the desire to do something together illustrated in the *Being with* discourse, and the irresistible *Call of the Other*. In sum, this ethics suggests raising awareness on what is already there, at play in the lowest levels of organizations, and from a human resource development (HRD) perspective, creating the inspiring conditions to let it be, beyond a temptation to be in a normative controlling position.

This Levinasian conceptualization of the ethics of serendipity that challenges the subject in the egocentrism of his or her persistence to exist calls for relationships to



**Figure 1.** Ethics of serendipity as the encounter of three ethical discourses.  
Source. Created by the authors, with the graphical support of Isabella Gomati de la Vega.

others outside of power and *makes place* for an alternative discourse of ethical development in organizations. In contrast to normative and objective approaches to HRD, it calls for making space through the production of a fertile emptiness. This vision of ethics does not mean merely leaving the other alone, not bothering him or her (liberal-individualistic approach), but rather being his or her neighbor, his or her proximate, and, therefore, responsible for him or her. It implies a relation of transcendence, which refers to the disinterested movement from the I toward the other without return. There, creativity and responsibility for the other are inherently correlated. Thus, with this conceptual piece as illustrated by the CreaLab of Volvo Group, we hope to discuss alternative conceptions of ethics development based on Levinas’s work, answering a call for a reconceptualization of current HRD strategies toward more social, interactive, and interpersonal approaches likely to sustain better knowledge learning (Gvaramadze, 2008; Knapp, 2010).

### Locating Ethics in the HRD Panorama

Although we could assume that a key motivation sustaining the development of ethics programs is to do good, several studies unfortunately conclude that these programs

“do more harm than good” (MacLean, Litzky, & Holderness, 2014). This is a serious threat for ethics development. When reviewing the limited effectiveness of dominant ethics programs, authors challenge their current design, implementation, and orientation.

Concerns have to do with the dominant normative and coercive orientation of most programs. In formal, top-down programs, they range from formal communication systems such as codes of conduct, mission statements, and training programs aimed at communicating ethical values and principles to formal surveillance systems, including evaluation processes, systems for whistleblowing, and an ombudsman to detect unethical behavior, and formal sanctioning systems, such as bonuses or promotions rewarding good behavior and punishing perceived bad behavior (Martineau et al., 2017). Such formal programs are criticized for being too brief (the majority being expedited in less than 1 hr; Weber, 2015), too generic, and disconnected from the real challenges employees face (Mercier & Deslandes, 2017; Weber & Wasieleski, 2012). These criticisms probably derive from the fact that such programs are in the hands of so-called responsible parties in charge of organizing ethics (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014), coming up with arcane lectures and unidirectional web-based programs out of sync with the interactive and experiential ways in which new members of the workforce (millennials) learn (Weber, 2015). They also tend to embrace Western-Centrism because most reflect North American and European views (Baek, 2017; Koljatic & Silva, 2015). In sum, such designs of ethics development programs reflect more of a checklist and concern for cost than a genuine interest in developing ethical employees. Consequently, ethics programs can become “window dressing” (MacLean et al., 2014, p. 352), to meet externally imposed constraints and satisfy external stakeholders, resulting from decoupling, that is, a symbolic adoption without substantive implementation (MacLean et al., 2014); ethics can even become a “smokescreen” (MacLean et al., 2014, p. 355), allowing unethical behavior to persist and proliferate.

Overall, we see that when ethics programs are in the hand of the so-called happy few responsible, there is a tendency toward the development of objectivist and coercive approaches to ethical development. Rather than internally and intrinsically motivated, such programs run the risk of being inefficient and counterproductive, if not unethical. Indeed, there is a risk that ethical development becomes another tool in the panoply of modern control and surveillance mechanisms (Martineau et al., 2017; Weaver et al., 1999), and can be used for unethical purposes (Weaver et al., 1999). Indeed, organizations are increasingly described as potential spaces for oppression, conformation, ideological enrollment (Fleming & Spicer, 2007), and even “epistemicide” (Seremani & Clegg, 2016, p. 3), violence directed toward other ways of thinking. Instead of limiting power abuses, mainstream conceptions of ethics under the form of externally imposed value or compliance-based systems (Boling, 1978; De Gaulejac, 2005; Foote & Ruona, 2008) paradoxically reinforce domination, stifling the possibility of real ethical questioning (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014).

The resulting individual suffering translates into a broad range of behaviors, from physical escape (e.g., suicide in the workplace) to psychological escape—with humor, cynicism, or hidden agendas (Fleming & Spicer, 2003)—and even creative resistance

(Courpasson & Clegg, 2012). One solution for people can be to find refuge in—or develop—organizational oases. This is what we explore next in a discussion of the cohabitation between three ethical discourses.

### Three Ethical Discourses

Next, we first present our illustrative example of the CreaLab, which then allows us to introduce three archetypal ethical discourses.

#### *The Illustrative Case of the CreaLab at Volvo Group*

The CreaLab stands as an alternative development space: It was formed at Volvo Group in mid-2015 when employees united their “dreams”<sup>1</sup> and took the initiative to found a creative space dedicated to alternative ways of training, of thinking, of doing one’s job, of relating to others. Implicitly, they located ethics at the core of their functioning. Indeed, described by one of its initiators as fundamentally a “story of encounter,” this CreaLab is designed for people who wish “to take responsibility” in shaping a new organizational and professional future, and challenge the status quo. This initiative first appears as a “bubble of autonomy” to escape an “oppressive system,” and the dominant organizational discourse of individual competition and efficiency. But beyond this first interpretation, we see that this CreaLab that puts “frugality,” “inclusion,” and “serendipity” at the heart of its functioning reveals and answers people’s desire for another type of experience, of relationship to self, others, and time. In fact, building on the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1981/2004, 1985, 1987), this example of alternative space will be used below to present three potential ideal types of ethical logics that can cohabit in organizations.

#### *The Discourse of the “Being I” Supportive of an Ethics of Narcissus*

The first type of ethical discourse is the *Being I* discourse that is a self-satisfying discourse of *looking good* to justify and maintain its place within society or the organization. At the CreaLab, as displayed on their flyer (Figure 2), this discourse is located in the calls to “capitalize on failures”: It signals the possibility to control and master every aspect of existence, even its failures. Another example would be “Listen to better sell,” where we see the instrumentalization of the other to meet one’s ends. Dominant in our societies and organizations, it is supported by an ethics of Narcissus (Roberts, 2001), characterized by both violence and the belief in independence or indifference toward the other.

First, violence as this discourse has its roots in the *persistence to exist* that guides each of us, and translates into the demonstration of a *good conscience* to make up for this violence. Indeed, referring to Spinoza, Levinas (1998) explains that, as finite beings, we are moved by a persistence to exist (*conatus essendi*), that is, both a need to survive and the fear of death. And, this persistence to exist is fundamentally violent

# POUR TOUTES CELLES ET CEUX QUI...

**SE PASSIONNENT  
POUR LEURS IDÉES**



<p> Sont condeurs  
ou décodeurs  
</p>

Font, plus qu'ils  
ne parlent

Ne pensent pas  
comme Monsieur  
Toutlemonde

**Innovent  
par intuition**



Pensent  
avec leur tête ;-)

Fédèrent  
pour diriger

En IMPOSENT  
sans s'imposer

Écoutent pour  
mieux vendre

**DÉVELOPPENT  
LES TALENTS,  
PLUS QUE  
LEUR EGO**



Savent que jouer  
collectif ne fait pas  
gagner qu'au foot



**CAPITALISENT  
SUR LEURS ÉCHECS**

**RECONNAISSENT LEURS ERREURS**



**Célèbrent  
chaque succès**

Prennent  
des risques  
la tête froide

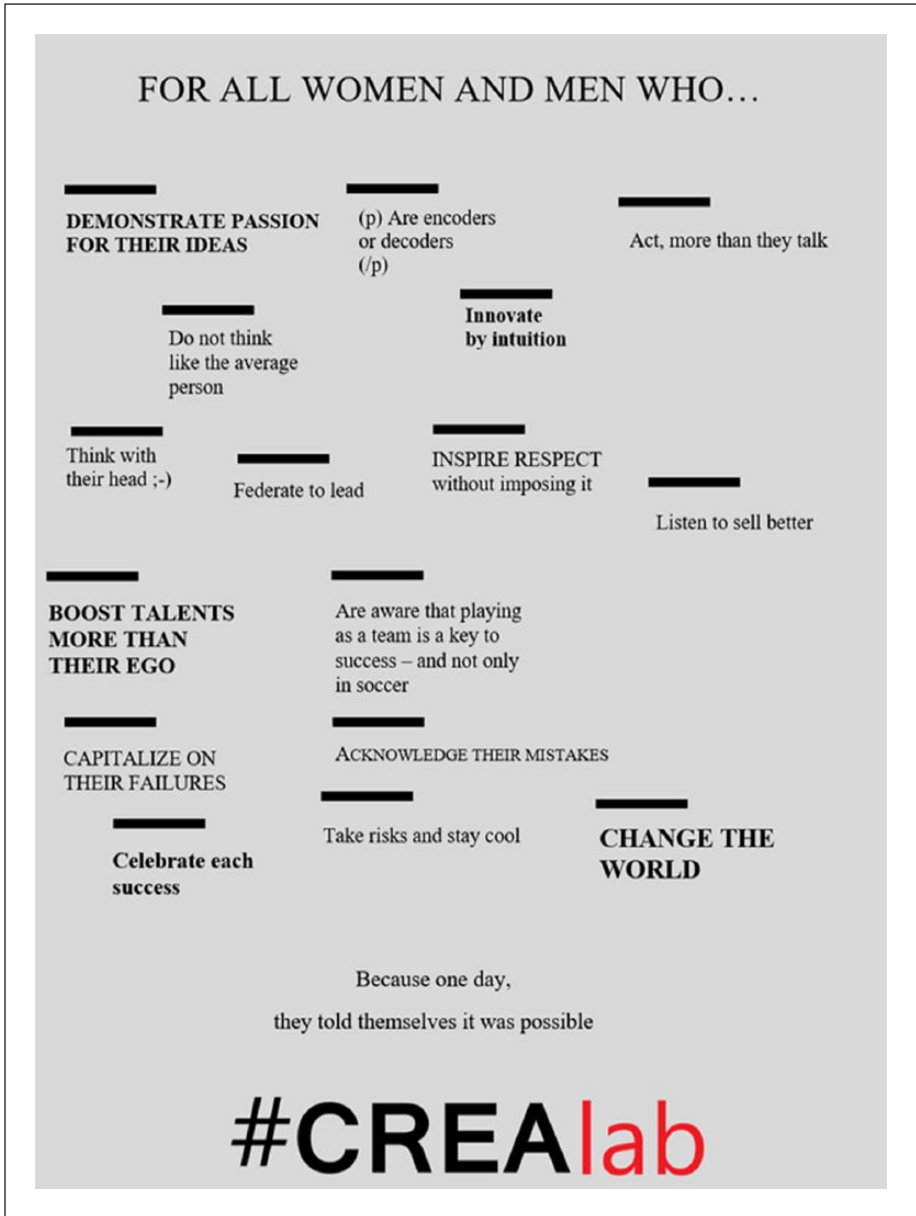


**CHANGENT  
LE MONDE**

Parce qu'un jour,  
ils se sont dit que c'était possible

# #CREAlab

(continued)



**Figure 2.** A CreaLab's flyer.  
Source. A document provided by Volvo Group.  
Translation of the CreaLab's flyer.  
Source. Translated by the authors.

insofar as our ability to survive might be at the expense of the other: I might have to kill to save my own life, the room I am occupying in the surface of earth cannot be occupied by others, is, thus, usurpation. This anguish to have to be at someone's expense (Levinas, 1999) constitutes an ethical interpellation of my own being and in its violence. Moral justifications demonstrated by this individual moved by a persistence to exist can, thus, be regarded as attempts to reassure oneself against this ethical concern of having to kill. Our consciousness aspires to be a good conscience, at rest, thanks to his or her own logical coherence (i.e., individual consistency with own principles and own will).

Second, this violence goes with indifference to the other reduced to the register of *being*, that is, a register when I am defined by my own self, not through the other: *I am I, and he is he* (Levinas, 1998). Reduced to his own being, the other appears as distinct and separate from me, which does not engage me anymore. The subject then becomes indifference to the other, to his brother in humankind. He does not hear him or her calling: *Am I my brother's keeper?* The reduction to the being register allows the subject to flee responsibility toward the other (Raffoul, 2016).

This overall discourse entails for Levinas a dogmatic naivety from the conscience (Levinas, 1972) to believe that it is being protected from the ethical concern through one's logical coherence. Indeed, this tendency of the I to justify oneself through a theoretical system focused on the being, and to close oneself to the other explains the critic by Wicks and Freeman (1998) toward the theorization of organizational ethics. Indeed, Levinas (1998) underlines that any conscience tends to close itself in the self-centered and self-satisfying discourse of the *I*. In particular, the ethical conceptions that justify the being in its persistence to exist, the prevalence of the fights in self-affirmation appear as theories, and not ethics itself, as it is irreducible to any theory. They stay open to the ethical concern, to the infinite of the questioning of the conscience.

The discourse of the *Being I* or self-satisfying *I* will, thus, convey the conception of the individual as a homo calculus, engaged in a logic of performance and of competition, who tries to maximize his or her interests. The individual is, thus, in a discourse of mastery, both regarding self and the environment, space and time, which tends to result in a discourse that objectifies the other, and the relationships to other. Typically, in organizations, this discourse of the *self-satisfying I* relates to arguments mobilized by individuals to demonstrate their legitimacy, or that of their job, or their project. At Volvo Trucks, the emergence of the CreaLab, concomitant to a wave of layoffs, quite unprecedented in an organization with a reputation for treating its employees well and keeping them over long periods can be seen as a call for survival. Through this commitment, the individual, thus, wants to demonstrate that he or she is "still alive," competitive, and legitimate, and will resist. The individual wants to look good, smart, and creative, despite the threatening environment. In this difficult context, it is even more important to look full of energy and conquering the world. Also, the individual might want to show that he or she is loyal and that his or her action fits with the expectations of the organization. Also, the development of slogans within the CreaLab with their value of individual creativity and the ability



to transgress established norms can be analyzed as a call to distinguish oneself to maintain its place in the organization. It can also establish the legitimacy of this space when directors can interpret it as a political act challenging the traditional organization it as a political challenge to the usual (Clegg & Courpasson, 2012). But this initiative may mean more than the pursue of one's own interests and power through an individual fight. Indeed, it is also a collective effort, which leads us to explore a second type of ethical discourse, with a more communitarian dimension, with its full political and ethical dimension.

### *The “Being With” Discourse Supportive of an Ethics of Reciprocity*

Second, we have *being with the other* discourse, which results from people's desire to overcome their individual fears and fight each other. Typical illustrative discourses at CreaLab would be “playing as a team is a key to success—and not only in soccer,” “Federate to win,” “Celebrate each success.” Here are exemplified different types of relationships with other people that refer to different conceptions of ethical and political relations of reciprocity, exchange, giving, sensitivity to others, and cultural belonging. Even if it is impossible to cover all these conceptions, it is interesting to note, along with Revault d'Allonnes (2006), that there exists a certain continuity in the ethical dimension (question) of the relationship to others and of the political construction in space and time. Revault d'Allonnes (2006) furthermore stresses two competing community models: the Roman model in which the community is built around centralized power and the Greek model in which the growth of the community goes hand in hand with power sharing and participation in festivities. Recent research has pinpointed the need for greater *Gemeinschaft* (Pina e Cunha et al., 2017), emotional bonding and awareness of others as embodied persons (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014); it has questioned the centralized and domineering view of power, the depersonalized relationship with others, and the ideological oppression that stifles spontaneity in the exchange of ideas (Seremani & Clegg, 2016). In the context of rivalry or submission of a group to a dominant power, the quest for *being otherwise* (Levinas, 1981) fuels the desire for other modes of organization closer to the agora described by Arendt (Revault d'Allonnes, 2006). The seeds of discord sown by such creative and resistant methods of organization often make managers wary because they have doubts about the efficiency of these methods and take them as a challenge to their own power (Courpasson, Dany, & Martí, 2016). However, other organizations have integrated them into their managerial practices, thereby running the risk of distorting them for the sake of standardizing people's desire to be together differently and to organize the pleasure experienced in relationships with others (Cederström & Grassman, 2008).

In the *being with* discourse, it is difficult to distinguish the ethical dimension from questions of anxiety, common interests, and identification, which can lead to bonding with others. More critically, the *being with* discourse may also be analyzed as an extension of the persistence of the existence of *I* in opposition to the group.

This discourse combines a call to/come out of one's shell/come out of oneself/with the bond with others.

The various (contingent) forms of exchange, reciprocal acknowledgment, and power sharing, which mark this bond, control and limit violence by the force of the habits they create (Honneth, 1994; Ricoeur, 2004), but in this respect, their effect is only an ephemeral ceasefire covering over struggle (Ajzenstat, 2001). This ceasefire does not outlive common interests and feelings. The difference and the otherness of the other poses a threat to group cohesion. The other's otherness is in turn threatened by the totalizing logic of the group's consciences, which unite in their quest for cohesion. The ambivalence of this *being with* the other discourse culminates in humanistic values whose source Levinas (2003) traces back to the ethical questioning of the self and the need for a good conscience. As a result, this form of humanism is in fact humanism for the proud (Burggraave, 1981). This explains why the ethics proposed by Levinas is not a new form of more satisfying or more coherent ethics but an attempt to attain the elusive ethical relationship to the other. It is in this respect that Levinas does not propose an ethics of gratitude/recognition (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015) but an outline of the radical nature of ethics and of humanism for the weak (Bernard, 2012), when he questions the violence of the human being.

### *The Disruptive Discourse of the Other Supportive of an Ethics of the Face*

"Because one day, they told themselves it was possible." This concluding phrase centered at the bottom of the CreaLab flyer illustrates the third discourse *Being called*. This discourse challenges the being in its persistence to exist as is today and shakes the conscience in its quest for status quo, self-coherence, and tranquility. This disturbance comes from the call of the Other when I am led to meet the Other authentically as Other, that is, in his or her effective difference. Whereas in the first discourse, the difference of the Other is what separates me from him or her, in the second discourse, what can be useful to complement me, here the difference calls me. Indeed, an authentic encounter means that I stop looking at the other in terms of similarities to me, as an alter ego, which implicitly is comforting me in my identity, but I make the disruptive experience of the difference (Levinas, 1987), which inadvertently challenges me, pointing out my singularities. I tend to be clueless in this authentic encounter, facing the unknown. Thus, the Other when met as another disrupts the I and its coherence, its identification to its biographical dimensions (i.e., projects, values, perceptions, relationships), which result from the persistence to exist. It surprises the consciousness through its *an-archy* (Levinas, 1972), through its absence of power. The Other disarms the intentionality of the consciousness, because of the anguish to hurt the Other (Levinas, 1999) or the desire of *an-archival* (Levinas, 1972) relationships, that is without power, according to the etymological roots reminded to us by Levinas. This discourse of the Other as a Face is expressed through the person I meet, not in his or her physical and social

appearances (that constitutes power and seductive relationships), but through a body, a skin that signifies me the Other as a person (Levinas, 1972; Pullen & Rhodes, 2014). In contrast with the moral conceptions portraying a disembodied individual, the discourse of the Other puts in front of me a human being that is vulnerable in his or her alterity and embodiment (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014).

This discourse, thus, corresponds to a selfless ethics that starts with the other, traverses the I, disrupts it, and then goes beyond the I. As such, it is infinite and irreducible. It, thus, profoundly contrasts with a selfish ethics anchored in the I, thought and designed from the I, based on self-concerns. As a consequence, this ethics goes beyond the binary logic of the good, or efficient, as a so-called good is impossible to define; otherwise, it would mean a reduction of the Other in something that can be apprehended, appropriated, such as an object. And, such an encounter is both unexpected and unpredictable: It irrupts and disrupts the individual. This is neither a meeting that I can predict nor a situation that I can control. The Face calls me to an ethical relationship that is, thus, both anarchic and dramatic as it provides discontinuity and a new turn in my day-to-day ethical conceptions.

This call, thus, constitutes me as a subject beyond the finitude of my existence, of my body, of my conscience. In Levinas's view (1979, 1985), the individual is always engaged with the other in an alliance with it beyond every decision, and this entanglement with the other affects the subject from its very constitution. Thus, the subject as such is the result of this entanglement, of this implication with the other. Subjectivity is the answer to the call of the Other, it is the response to its summon. It is in this perspective that Levinas (1972) considers ethics as first compared with logic as well as any other philosophical conception, which, for him, comes from this fundamental interrogation. This heteronomy of ethics toward ethical theories, that leads Thanem and Wallenberg (2015) to portray Levinas' approach as an *ethics of ethics*, is necessary to gain awareness that the subject is not an individual, which exists in itself and by itself. Rather, it is a subject constituted by call of the Other. Therefore, the Levinasian subject is always entangled with the others, it finds itself always involved in an ethical relation, *malgré soi*. In this perspective, the infinite of the questioning of the being comes indeed "prior" to any awareness, to any language, to any moral and political philosophy. Ethics is infinite, is beyond language (Levinas, 1985), and can only be approached by language abuse (Viola, 2014).

In its persistence to exist, however, the *I* tends to reappropriate the disruptive call and to think that ethics has its origin in the I, in the subject's will and his or her *biography*. The *I* objectivizes this call and reduces the infinite of the dissensus to an engulfing and totalizing logic (Levinas, 1999). This results in the two aforementioned discourses that appear as compromises of the conscience with what questions it, when the conscience comes back and can rest in its coherence (Levinas, 1972).

Table 1 below compares and contrasts these three discourses in terms of the subjective ethical experience, type of ethics, implicit relationship to time. It also introduces the ethics of serendipity (discussed in the next paragraph) as an encounter between these three discourses.

**Table I.** Ethics of Serendipity as the Encounter Between Three Types of Ethical Discourses in Organizations.

Main ethical discourse	Autocentric discourses <i>Being I Being with</i>	Other-impulsed discourse <i>Being called beyond</i>	Ethics of serendipity as the dramatic interference between three discourses and their valorization <i>Being I, Being with, and Being called beyond</i>
Illustrations from the CreaLab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capitalize on failures. Listen to sell better. Take risks and keep cool</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because one day, they told themselves it was possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disruptive desire to meet others otherwise than only through individual/team competition; desire for fraternity</li> </ul>
Main logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience of self-satisfaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience of disruption by the Other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience of disruption and collision, with togetherness and satisfaction</li> </ul>
Roots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persistence to exist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other Dis-intereste</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frustration with dominant approaches that leads to a desire to articulate the three ethical discourses</li> </ul>
Relationships to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• quest to survive/persist in a competitive environment (struggle for existence)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community of interesse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dramatic confrontation with the otherness of others</li> </ul>
Type of logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being (struggle for existence)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonintentional encounter with the Other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fraternity in competition</li> </ul>
Type of ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualistic and instrumental</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other experienced with passivity and as a break from daily life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensibility to otherwise than being, in the being self and being together</li> </ul>
Source of ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being self Conscious, intentional, individualistic discourse dominated by performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• as a break from daily life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conscious and intentional discourse inspired by the desire for otherness</li> </ul>
Reference to time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethics of Narcissus instrumental, power over the other I (aggregation of I)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethics of the Face Disruptive, altruistic, and relational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eventual, dramatic, experiential and relational</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synchronic time perceived as a finite, linear temporality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The infinite</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The disruptive collision between the three sources</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finite and death to be conquered through self-surpassing continuity, foreseeable future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anarchic and utopian time (away from power-relationships and measure)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discontinuity beyond and within synchronicity, Discontinuous dramatic time. Openness to serendipity beyond finitude and death</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive continuity, foreseeable future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surprise, serendipity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Random encounters beyond cognitive continuity</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• project and a foreseeable future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethical unforeseeable open future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Openness to absolute novelty</li> </ul>

## The Disruptive Ethical Cohabitation: Toward an Ethics of Serendipity and Implications for HRD

The exposition to these three ethical discourses—*Being I*, *Being with*, and *Being called*—in organizations can certainly be uncomfortable. It moves people away from the experience of a single logic, challenges established order, and raises awareness about alternative possible. But this cohabitation can also open the space for an ongoing dialogue between the three ways to relate ethically to other. In fact, we want to suggest that from this cohabitation emerges a new type of experiencing ethics, what we call an ethics of serendipity. At the crossroads of the three ideal types above exposed, this ethics combines the consciousness of the autocentric discourses (*ethics of Narcissus* and *ethics of reciprocity*) to the radical selflessness of the *ethics of the face*. We further develop this perspective below.

### Serendipity

The concept of serendipity can be traced back to the 18th century when the term was first coined by British art historian Horace Walpole in a letter to diplomat Horace Mann to characterize a critical discovery he had made (Merton & Barber, 2004). He used the word *serendipity* to define a happy but unexpected discovery. And, in doing so, he referred to the Persian tale *The Three Princes of Serendip*, whose heroes were making discoveries, “by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of” (Merton & Barber, 2004, p. 2). By employing this word, Walpole put at the heart of serendipity an *accidental sagacity*, that is, the combination of chance and the prepared mind (Gabriel, Muhr, & Linstead, 2014). Today, in scientific research, serendipity is associated with a “capability” (de Rond, 2014, p. 344), an ability to “see bridges where others s[ee] holes” (p. 351).

### Ethics of Serendipity

Although we have introduced three ethical discourses as ideal types, we present the ethics of serendipity as the actual happening that can emerge from their dramatic interference. We will call this type of ethics *eventual* (from the word *event*) as it should not to be regarded as a *natural* outcome resulting from a chain of events, as a dialectical consequence that necessarily has to arrive. Rather, it can be referred to as a contingent outcome, that is, a result that indeed emerges from that referred interaction, but that surpasses and goes beyond it, reconfiguring and challenging the mutual relations between the involved individuals. Consequently, there is an insurmountable void between the sequence of events, the sequence of interactions between the individuals, and the final outcome. This void or gap stands as the necessary emptiness, from where a new situation initiates, that is, a situation, which was not contained as a possibility in the sequence of events that preceded it.

This ethics of serendipity corresponds to a situation where individuals experience the unpredictable disruption of their own perceptions, sustained by their vulnerability

to surprise and the sagacity of their consciousness. It, thus, results from the unpredictable collision between my needs, my aspirations, the socially imposed regulation, and the irresistible and permanent disturbing call of the Other. The ethics of serendipity shows a performative quality as it transforms me: I am not the same as before I had met the Other, neither the same as tomorrow when the Other will affect me again. It is serendipitous also, as it is unpredictable and irregular; we are not equally touched by the Other, all the more so, at the unconscious level. Such an ethics is materialized at the CreaLab of Volvo Group, insofar as individuals seek the alternative experience of the confrontation with the unexpected.

We, thus, see that this eventual ethics of serendipity that intentionally welcomes the unpredictability of the encounter with otherness contains a certain dimension of paradox, making chance happen, considering it is possible to intentionally cause the unintentional. It is also paradoxical in its conception of responsibility, challenging the traditional portrayal of rationally defined moral responsibility (Merton & Barber, 2004). But it reveals an intention to liberate oneself from relationships dominated by intentions, struggle, and competitiveness, that is, an ethical desire to experience something else than fighting against each other, for own survival within the organization. This can, thus, appear as a reappropriation by the consciousness of the passive confrontation with the infinite, a consciousness that pretends to orient and master the unknown, the unpredictable. As such, it stands as a more secure and reassuring view of chance in creation than the passive exposure to the timeless unexpected and unknowable infinite.

### *Ethics of Serendipity and Implications for HRD*

The answer to the pressing demand to foster ethical behaviors in organizations is often designed through top-down cognitive and individual approaches to ethics development, with an emphasis on programs, training, codes, and the role of leadership (Foote & Ruone, 2008; Noelliste, 2013). This mostly puts employees in the position of passive recipients, from whom compliance is expected. The ethics of serendipity as resulting from the cohabitation of multiple discourses in organizations invites considering the multiplicity of approaches to ethics and ethical development. In particular, our emphasis on the *ethics of the face* anchored in the *Being called*, Other-impulsed discourse sheds light on a bottom-up perspective that is relational, corporeal, and intersubjective. It hopefully results in employees' coming up with newer and stronger possibilities rather than domination by externally imposed practices (Ardichvili, 2013).

Overall, talking about the ethics of serendipity offers an alternative, challenging the dominant power structures in organizations (Callahan, 2013), as well as complementing intrapersonal perspectives (Noelliste, 2013) and macroperspectives (Ardichvili, 2013) on ethics and HRD. It invites human resource (HR) professionals to contemplate the value of a bottom-up approach to ethics, with designs likely to leave room for the emergent and intersubjective to take place. In such scenarios, the role for HRD is to create the inspiring conditions for the unexpected to happen.

**Table 2.** Approaches to Ethics Development in Ethics of Serendipity Versus Dominant Approaches.

	Dominant approaches to HRD	Ethics of serendipity
Approach to HRD	Individual and cognitive	Social and experiential
Typical format	Formal programs	Emergent disruptive initiatives
Examples	Computer-based sexual harassment training	CreaLab; “Yes ending” game
Roles for employees	Compliance to predefined rules	Self-expression and encounter with the other within an inspired collective
Role for HRD	Program designers and implementers	Create the inspiring conditions for the unexpected to happen; paradox holders
• Pros for HRD	• More controllable	• Increases sense of responsibility and solidarity for the other that inspires collaboration
• Cons for HRD	• Window screen; potentially inefficient over the long term	• Less controllable

Note. HRD = human resource development.

For example, in the CreaLab, it started allowing a group of 20 *dreamers* to make use of an empty space. One month later, with less than 300 euros but hundreds of benevolent hours, the first workshops could take place. There different types of activities were implemented allowing *letting go* and *the exploration of the unexplored*. Among them, the *Yes ending* game required participants to substitute the typical *yes, but answer to yes, and*. This was meant to avoid having participants tell their own stories, but rather, allowing openness to the ideas of others, and coconstruction. As we said, it implies a certain degree of paradox, turning HRD into a paradox holder. Indeed, serendipity implies attention, expectation, and an open attitude for the unexpected to occur. It implies the acceptance of a certain level of randomness in reality, which, at the same time, implies the impossibility of the I having absolute control over the whole of reality. It, therefore, involves the acknowledgment of an essential contingency, which inescapably limits the I’s ability to control the events of the world.

This acknowledgment and acceptance of uncertainty, of the uncontrollable, which, in a certain way, withdraws the control capability—the power—of the I, represents an opening toward an *emptiness* from which effective novelty can spring. This emptiness is not just a void, a mere lack of being, but it represents concretely a fertile space, a fruitful room, where creativity can occur.

This idea is not unlike the Levinasian ethical approach. On the contrary, Levinasian ethics entails a creativity conception, which precisely implies the idea of an empty space from which it is possible for an effective novelty to occur. Indeed, in his work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas borrows from the Jewish mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572) the idea of *zimtzum*, that is, a self-withdrawal of God to

*make room* for creation to happen (Levinas, 1979). This contraction of the infinite is the initial condition (Meskin, 2007), necessary for an independent and different being to exist. Creativity thus is not, within the Levinasian ethical framework, to be understood just as the correlative term for production, growth, progress, and expansion, but rather as a correlation with the ideas of diminution and degrowth to cooperate with others.

The act of *making place* means the production of a void where the other can exercise his or her being, where his or her existence takes place. This does not mean merely leaving the other alone or not bothering him or her; rather, it means being his or her neighbor, his or her proximate. It is precisely because of this alternative conception of creativity and creation that the interactions between individuals, which occur through the production of a fertile emptiness is not to be understood as a clash of opposing, antagonistic freedoms (Levinas, 1979), but as a *relation of transcendence*, the disinterested movement of the I toward the other without return. In effect, *creativity* and *responsibility for the other* are inherently correlated.

For the *existence* of the other to occur, to take *place*, such an existence needs room, a *place*, or an empty space. The role of HRD is, therefore, to make room or create empty space for individuals to cocreate together. This approach, thus, answers a call for a reconceptualization of current HRD strategies, moving away from their individualistic roles toward more social and experiential (Knapp, 2010), as well as interactive and interpersonal (Gvaramadze, 2008) approaches likely to sustain better knowledge sharing and organizational learning. Table 2 compares and contrasts the dominant approaches with ethics development to the ethics of serendipity.

## Conclusion

The call of otherness that unpredictably emerges in organizations, as illustrated by the CreaLab, demonstrates the possibility of a nonnormative ethical discourse that sustains a quest for an embodied relationship to others beyond prediction, delineation, and reduction of uncertainty. We suggest that the emerging ethics of serendipity illustrate the potentiality of an ongoing encounter between different ethical discourses that happen in organizations, presented in this article as ideal types. As a possibility rather than a necessity, the ethics of serendipity are, therefore, fragile, in suspension, and contingent. They are accordingly always to be written as they inherently involve incoming disruptive and paradoxical possibilities at the crossroads of surprise and preparedness. This approach to ethics certainly challenges the traditional instrumental and normative approaches as its inherent unpredictability appears in sharp contrast with the rational assumption in ethics and its associated control. Therefore, this article calls for future research to investigate how ethical serendipity could effectively take place within organizations, even if it should only be considered as possible traces, and never a phenomenon that can be objectified. Therefore, what conditions can sustain ethical surprise for the actors? How can organizations allow for the desire to meet the other beyond the usual power and



control relationships? How can HRD support and reinforce ethics that may already be at play in the organization, beyond traditional practices that prescribe specific ethical behaviors? What skills are required from HR developers when ethics can neither be instilled nor controlled by the organization but rather given time and space for it? How to maintain a balance between individualistic, communitarian interests, and disinterestedness? From an empirical perspective, how to research a possibility and a trace that resist objectification? In brief, this encourages alternative approaches to ethics in HRD that are definitely more sensitive and welcoming of the unexpected, the experiential, the otherness of the other and of oneself.

### Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the constructive feedback provided by the editor and the reviewers. The manuscript also benefited from the support of the participants and organizers (Carl Rhodes, Alison Pullen, Torkild Thanem) of the Sub-theme 12: Being Good or Looking Good? Interrogating the Contradictions and Tensions in Organizational Ethics of the 2016 EGOS conference. We are also extremely grateful to Susan Goutet for her invaluable editorial work on the text. Finally, our heartfelt thanks go to the CreaLab Team at Volvo Group whose trust and interest have been instrumental.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Note

1. The words with quotation marks in this section “Three Ethical Discourses” refer to verbatim of actors participating in the CreaLab project

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