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Morality on the Edge

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Modernity and the Holocaust in Lithuania

Edited by

Jolanta Saldukaitytė and Luc Anckaert

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The Holocaust and the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: an Attempt at Mutual Clarification

Didier Pollefeyt

Introduction

Generally, the (ethical) concept of God in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is immediately deduced from the idea of ‘the face of the other.’ God comes to my mind there, where the Other addresses me in all his or her fragility as an ethical appeal to be respected in his or her irreducible alterity. Nonetheless, this concept of God does not fall from heaven within the philosophy of Levinas, but it gradually takes shape within the dynamics of his thinking.

In this contribution, we want to look for the existential presuppositions (*les expériences préphilosophiques*) that started and continued to feed the movement of thought of Levinas. After all, philosophy does not happen in a vacuum but in and from dialogue with life. In this way, we believe we can provide ourselves with an illuminating route to the genesis of Levinas’ philosophical concept of an ethical God.

When we search for the vivid, pre-philosophical presuppositions of Levinas’ thinking, we naturally arrive at the traumatic experience that he, personally, and as a member of the Jewish people, was a part of the Holocaust in the middle of the twentieth century and the untold horror that word evokes.¹

In an interview with François Poirié, Levinas says:

“My life, would it have passed between a Hitlerism endlessly sensed and a Hitlerism refusing to be forgotten?”²

¹ Robert Plant, *Levinas, Philosophy, and Biography* (Oxford, United Kingdom: University Press, 2019), 3.

² “Ma vie, se-serait-elle passée entre l’hitlérisme incessamment pressenti et l’hitlérisme se refusant à tout oublier?” François Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?* (Lyon, France: La Manufacture, 1987), 83 (All translations are the author’s own, unless otherwise stated).

Levinas did not made the Holocaust very explicitly the subject of reflection. The Holocaust is beyond reasoning and philosophy. Yet we find sporadic indications that make us understand that, for him, this experience forms the background of his philosophy.³ Indeed, his whole thinking can be understood as an attempt to escape the fundamental doom of the evil of the Holocaust. In this essay, we want to make clear how this movement is accomplished ‘without saying’. In *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, his friend Maurice Blanchot writes:

*How to philosophize, how to write in the memory of Auschwitz, of those who said to us, sometimes in notes buried near the crematoria: know what happened, do not forget and at the same time, you will never know. It is this thought that runs through and carries all of Levinas’ philosophy and that he proposes to us without saying it, beyond and before any obligation!*⁴

In doing so, we will detect a concept of God that no longer has the character of a contingent, arbitrary, or out of the blue thought experiment. Precisely insofar as his work stems from a flesh-and-blood experience with Nazism, it seems to hold the promise of a revolutionarily new, real, and liberating ‘other God’, the only one who, methodologically, can pass the delicate acid test of the Holocaust for philosophy and theology.

We set out our analysis of the thought of Levinas in four parts. In a first stage we highlight the *il y a*-tic dimension of the Holocaust. The *il y a* is the Levinasian category of being that seems to us grafted onto the experience of the Holocaust. It will make us understand how Levinas’ philosophy is a thinking that attempts to find a liberating way out of the fundamental ‘fascism’ of being (§ 2). Next, we describe the event of the appropriation of being (hypostasis) as the (first) human response to the *il y a*. The Holocaust, however, will make us understand how this acquisition of identity

³ Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights* (Milwaukee: United States: Marquette University Press, 2002), 28-29, 179; Glenn J. Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis* (Pittsburgh, United States: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 37-39; Robert Eaglestone, “Levinas and the Holocaust,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford, United Kingdom: University Press, 2019), 7-12.

⁴ “Comment philosopher, comment écrire dans le souvenir d’Auschwitz, de ceux qui nous ont dit, parfois en des notes enterrées près des crématoires: sachez ce qui s’est passé, n’oubliez pas et en même temps jamais vous ne saurez. C’est cette pensée que traverse, porte toute la philosophie de Levinas et qu’il nous propose sans la dire, au-delà et avant toute obligation!” Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 18.

can only produce a partial liberation: during World War II, the Jewish people were completely thrown back on their own identity and imprisoned in themselves. The question of salvation will therefore receive a transformation here into a liberation ‘from’ itself (§ 3). I cannot save myself. Subsequently, it will become apparent how only devotion to the Other holds a promise of true liberation. Here again, the Holocaust exemplifies this movement from ‘autonomy’ to ‘heteronomy’ (§ 4). Finally, it will be shown how, in devotion to the other, we can trace the total Other. We will confront Levinas’ concept of God with the classical categories of omnipotence (and impotence) and mercy (and justice). Firstly, however, we will show, from a brief biographical sketch, how Levinas has been confronted personally with the catastrophe of the Holocaust (§ 1).

1. The Holocaust in the life of Emmanuel Levinas⁵

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906 in Lithuania.⁶ He grew up in a religious, Zionist-minded, middle-class family. His education is situated within the tradition of urban Judaism which, unlike Hasidism (a more rural form of Judaism), does not address God directly but meets God through the serious devotion to the Torah and Talmud. That is why he learned to read the Torah in Hebrew as early as six years of age. Both ghettos and pogroms were unknown to him.

When he was eight years old, World War I began. His family left Lithuania to emigrate to Kharkov in Ukraine. Here, as a child, he experienced the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1920, fearful of communism, his family left Kharkov to resettle in Lithuania, which had become independent in 1918. In 1923, he went to study in France. In Strasbourg, Levinas started philosophical studies, which he completed with a doctoral thesis on Husserl in 1930. He obtained the French nationality, married, and completed his military service in 1932. Subsequently, he joined the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* in Paris which advocated for the emancipation of Jews in those countries where they did not yet enjoy civil rights. In this way, he constantly came into contact with the social and political problems that Jews were already facing before the war. In this vein, he wrote one of his first articles, *De l'évasion*, in 1935, in which he described the state of the time. The incessant despair, fatigue, and inescapable fate that emerged from the

⁵ For our biographical outline, we primarily draw from Poirie’s interview with Levinas. See: Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*.

⁶ Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 22; Roger Burggraeve, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping, Gods passie en de ander, vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas* (Leuven, Belgium: Acco, 1991), 265-267.

Germany of Leibniz and Kant, and Goethe and Hegel, are central. The threat of a world catastrophe is clearly perceptible in this work.⁷

In 1939, when the Nazis started a world war, Levinas was mobilized as a soldier in the French army. During the war, Levinas served his country as an interpreter of Russian and German.⁸ Upon the withdrawal of the 10th army, he was captured near Rennes (1940). After several months of internment in France, he was transported to Hanover, Germany. Here he was assigned to a special command with other Jews. Separated from the other French soldiers, he was ordered to work in a forest under the supervision of the *Wehrmacht* (the armed forces of Nazi Germany).⁹ Although racial discrimination existed in the camp, he enjoyed special conditions arising from the provisions of the Geneva Convention that protect prisoners of war. During his imprisonment he read a lot, including works from Hegel, Proust, Rousseau, and Diderot.

In the camp, he came into contact with Christian charity in the figure of the camp chaplain, father Pierre.¹⁰ Whilst in captivity, Levinas began

⁷ Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 130.

⁸ Robert Eaglestone, "Levinas and the Holocaust," 2-3.

⁹ In *Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme*, Levinas writes: "There were seventy of us in a forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany. An extraordinary coincidence was the fact that the camp bore the number 1492, the year of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain under the Catholic Ferdinand V. The French uniform still protected us from Hitlerian violence. But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us or gave us work or orders or even a smile - and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes - stripped us of our human skin." See: Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Sean Hand (Baltimore, United States: The Johns Hopkins University Press: 1990), 153.

¹⁰ For Levinas, this was a very important experience in shaping his attitude towards Christianity. According to Levinas, Auschwitz offered opportunities for a new encounter between Judaism and Christianity. Throughout his work, he regularly mentions the Christian *caritas* that revealed itself during the Holocaust: "In the face of this torture, in the face of this misery, in the face of this abyss of Hitlerism, the Church showed understanding directly to the Jewish population. In my opinion, a new period in Jewish-Christian relations is beginning." In French: "Il y a eu dans l'Eglise devant cette torture, devant cette misère, devant cet abîme de l'hitlérisme, une compréhension, témoignée directement à la population juive. La commence; à mon avis, une nouvelle période dans les relations judéo-chrétiennes." See: Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 121. He further refers to what Franz Rosenzweig said in this context. See: Emmanuel Levinas, *Transcendance et intelligibilité, suivi d'un entretien* (Geneva, Switzerland: Labor et Fides, 1984), 55-56.

writing his first work, *De l'existence à l'existant*. He finished it after liberation. Meanwhile, as the fate of European Jews was unfolding, news of the extermination seeps into Hanover slowly: a family member disappears, a family no longer answers. Levinas' wife and daughter will finally survive the war thanks to a monastery in France, near Orléans.¹¹ His mother-in-law was deported and never came back from the camps, while his father and brothers were killed in Lithuania by the SS.

“Everything that our families went through was not known. All the horrors of the camps, imaginable.”¹²

2. The Holocaust as a Foundational Paradigm of the *il y a*

In the midst of the war, Levinas worked on one of his first texts, *De l'existence à l'existant*, which he completed shortly after the war. In this work, he developed a basic category that will form a key to understanding his thinking on the Holocaust: the *il y a*. The *il y a*, or being without being, is the original situation of doom that threatens to overwhelm every concrete being with its anonymous, absorbing presence.¹³ It is precisely this threatening, formless being without being that awakens in an individual a liberation dynamic, an unstoppable desire for a way out of this fundamental calamity.

The *il y a* is the presence of a presence. There is not this and there is not that, but there is also not nothing.¹⁴ It is about pure and brutal being with its inhuman neutrality. This *il y a* can never be experienced directly because there is not a subject opposed to an object; there is only the diffuse, all-encompassing, and overwhelming anonymous being. Only through a mental extrapolation can we provide ourself an existential access route to this boundary concept.

The experience of war now is - precisely because it is the concrete *Sitz im Leben* (in English: ‘place in origin’) of this notion - an appropriate

¹¹ See: Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 130.

¹² “Tout ce que nos familles avaient vécu n'était pas connu. Toutes les horreurs des camps, imaginables.”

¹³ Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, 17; Pollefeyt, “Theology as Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas as Jewish Post-Holocaust Thinker,” 324-328.

¹⁴ Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, 18-21. For our description of the *il y a*, we rely on two texts. See: Roger Burggraeve, *Het gelaat van de bevrijding: Een heilsdenken in het spoor van Emmanuel Levinas* (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 1986), 15-28; Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Nemo, *Ethique et Infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo, Le Livre De Poche, Biblio essais* (4018) (Paris, France: Fayard, 1982), 45-51.

avenue of access for understanding the *il y a*.¹⁵ During World War II, Levinas himself experienced the threat of the regression to being without question.¹⁶ In the words of Levinas: “In war reality rends the words and images that dissimulate it, to obtrude in its nudity and in its harshness. Harsh reality (this sounds like a pleonasm!), harsh object-lesson, at the very moment of its fulguration when the drapings of illusion burn war is produced as the pure experience of pure being”¹⁷.

The Jewish people, under Hitlerism, were exposed to this *il y a* in the most pronounced way. This happens already before and along the establishment of the extermination camps. Jews were taken out of their houses and randomly executed on the streets. This is illustrated by many black and white pictures from this period in the history of the Third Reich. They show Jewish men, women and even children killed in public areas, still with their daily clothes on, chaotically left behind on the pavement, with local citizens looking with aversion, curiosity and even glee. The ghettos created a new world on the way to the *il y a*: a world disconnected from the outer world, with no resources, no possibility to escape, a world where Jews were delivered to pure survival; in which Jewish life had no value anymore. In the ghettos, there is no relief, no future, but where you still had to exist. The activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* were perhaps the most horrific pre-camp expression of this delivery of the Jewish people to the *il y a* or ‘being-without-being’. Being taken out of the warmth of their houses, their beds; the care of their children, the love of their parents; sick and healthy, old and young, flew together like cattle, quickly and nervous; brought together in the anonymity of fields and forests; executed on the spot. This is the horror of the *il y a*, of not being someone anymore. Digging

¹⁵ Pollefeyt, “Theology as Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas as Jewish Post-Holocaust Thinker,” 325.

¹⁶ In the Dutch-language version of *Signature*, which appeared under the new title *Handschrift*, Levinas explicitly establishes the connection between the war experience and the *il y a*: “Between 1933 and 1945, nothing of the benevolence that the corresponding German expression ‘*es Gibt*’ seems to contain revealed itself in ‘there is’.” See: Roger Burggraeve, *Mens en medemens, verantwoordelijkheid en God: de metafysische ethiek van Emmanuel Levinas* (Leuven, Belgium: Acco, 1986), 165. With the *es Gibt*, Levinas refers to the Heideggerian concept of being. Although *es Gibt* and *il y a* are corresponding terms, they are completely different philosophically.

¹⁷ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Texts, Volume 1). Translated by A Lingis, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979, p. 21. In French: “Dure réalité (cela sonne comme un pléonasm !), dure leçon de choses, la guerre se produit comme l’expérience pure de l’être pur” (*Totality et Infini*, preface, p. IX).

your own grave: it is like opening the *il y a* for yourself. The bodies of the executed, all piled together, still warm, some even not death, buried in one tomb, dead or alive. This is an illustration of the *il y a*, existence where you can no longer be a human person, where the ethical encounter is suffocated; human beings underway to non-being, merciless, without hope for redemption, submitted to the violence of being. However, the most explicit place where the *il y a* overwhelmed the Jewish people and other victims was in their experience of being transferred into the extermination camps. Striking are the (frequent) testimonies of the transport of the Jews to the camps. They include a very existential description of what Levinas means by the *il y a*. People were packed together in freight cars sixty to seventy at one time. For days they were shaken aimlessly, the destination unknown to them. They were plunged into utter darkness where no one recognized anyone yet. With no lights, no plumbing. Only the sweltering heat of being with and through each other, without ventilation or food. Children crying because their mother is becoming hysterical, young people copulating with each other, not bothering anyone anymore, elderly people dying without anyone looking after them. There is only the dark chaos where one is no longer a person but still does not (yet) cease to exist.”¹⁸

Arriving at the camp, individuals are stripped of all that makes them persons, and they lapse into a state even lower than that of things.¹⁹ In this context, everything was dissolved into nothingness. Here began a life of total “de-subjectification”²⁰ and total decay into gray uniformity: shaved, bare, disinfected, reduced to numbers without a name. This is the very meaning of the *il y a*: everything is dissolved and loses its personal contours.²¹ In this sense we can rightly speak of the *il y a*-tic dimension of the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, a mode of ‘(not) being human’ never before seen in history emerges. In the chaos of the Shoah, Hitlerism creates the *Muselmänner*. In the analysis of Agamben, the *Muselman* is “not only or not so much a limit between life and death; rather, he marks the

¹⁸ See Elie Wiesel’s description in Elie Wiesel, *De nacht*, translated by Nini Brunt (Hilversum, the Netherlands: Gooi en Sticht, 1986), 29.

¹⁹ David Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence* (New York, United States: Suny Press, 2018), 127.

²⁰ Regarding his own camp experience, Levinas writes: “A small inner murmur, the strength and wretchedness of persecuted people, reminded us of our essence as thinking creatures, but we were no longer part of the world. (...) We were beings entrapped in their species; despite all their vocabulary, beings without language.” Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 153.

²¹ Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*, 38-39.

threshold between the human and the inhuman”²² (Agamben 2002: 55). The historian Poliakov describes how victims reached this stage after two months in the camps:

“When they were still walking, they did it like automatons, once stopped they were no longer capable of any other movement. They fell to the ground, exhausted, everything was equal to them. Their bodies were blocking the way, they could be walked on, they did not move their arms or legs an inch; no protest, no cry of pain came out of their half-open mouths. And yet, they were still alive. The Kapos, the SS could even beat them, push them, they did not move, they had become insensitive to everything. They were beings without thought, without reaction, one could say without soul.”²³

*(...) This biological image is immediately accompanied by another image, which by contrast seems to contain the true sense of the matter. The Muselman is not only or not so much a limit between life and death; rather, he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman.*²⁴

In summary, the *Muselmänner* is an individual on the way back from the *il y a*.²⁵ All alike, existing, but without thought, without reaction, without soul, inescapably at the mercy of dreary anonymity and brutality. Victims became ‘living dead’, walking corpses whose only mission was to die on command.²⁶

²² Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive* (New York, USA: Zone Books), 55.

²³ “Le détenu parvenait le plus souvent à cette étape, caractérisée par un incroyable amaigrissement et une véritable hébétude mentale, après deux mois de séjour au camp. Quand ils marchaient encore, ils le faisaient comme des automates, une fois arrêtés ils n’étaient plus capables d’aucun autre mouvement. Ils tombaient par terre, exténués, tout leur était égal. Leurs corps bouchaient le passage, on pouvait marcher sur eux, ils ne retiraient pas d’un centimètre leurs bras ou leurs jambes; aucune protestation, aucun cri de douleur ne sortait de leurs bouches entr’ouvertes. Et pourtant, ils étaient encore vivants. Les kapos, les S.S. même pouvaient les battre, les pousser, ils ne bougeaient pas, ils étaient devenus insensibles à tout. C’étaient des êtres sans pensée, sans réaction, on aurait dit sans âme.” Leon Poliakov, *Breviaire de la haine: Le IIIe Reich et les Juifs* (Paris, France: Calmann-Lévy, 1985), 249, 254-255.

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive* (New York, United States: Zone Books, 2002), 55.

²⁵ Pollefeyt, “Theology as Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas as Jewish Post-Holocaust Thinker,” 325.

²⁶ Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence*, 53, 57.

What is the 'ultimate' sense of belonging to human species? And does such a sense exist? For many, the Muselman seems to constitute nothing other than an answer to this question.²⁷

Impossible to get their names out of their mouths, let alone their dates of birth. Even gentleness was not powerful enough to make them talk. They only looked at you with expressionless eyes. (...) You could only smell a poisonous breath as if it was coming out of already decaying entrails.²⁸

Elie Wiesel recounts his Holocaust experience in a book with the telling title, *Night*.²⁹ Indeed, the Holocaust is the experience of darkness par excellence. Light means orientation. In the night, however, everything dissolves into nothingness. In the night, everything is equalized, everything sinks into namelessness. There is only the brutal, inescapable experience of 'being there'. Who has experienced that being more than a mother with her baby standing naked in the snow waiting to be shot?

Thus, the *il y a* is the oppressive fullness of being that swallows up an individual and makes him or her nothing, leaving them to total abandonment.³⁰ All distinctions fall away between men and women, adults and children, scholars and illiterates, families and households, and between life and death. Everything is placed under one umbrella. One is already dead when one enters the camp:

*"Over there. Do you see the chimney over there? Do you see it? And the flames, do you see them?" (Yes, we saw the flames.)
"Over there, that's where they will take you. Over there will be your grave. You still don't understand? You sons of bitches. Don't you understand anything? You will be burned! Burned to a cinder! Turned into ashes!"³¹*

²⁷ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*, 57.

²⁸ "Impossible de sortir de leur bouche leur nom, encore moins leur date de naissance. La douceur même n'était pas assez puissante pour les faire parler. Ils vous regardaient seulement d'un regard sans expression. (...) Vous ne sentiez qu'une haleine empoisonnée comme si elle sortait d'entrailles déjà en décomposition." Poliakov, *Breviaire de la haine*, 255.

²⁹ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, translated by Marion Wiesel (New York, United States: Hill and Wang, 2006), 86, 106-107 and 113.

³⁰ Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*, 38-39.

³¹ Wiesel, *Night*, 30-31.

There is no more death, because there is no life.³² To be *Muselmänner* is ‘to simmer’ in the *il y a*.³³ To be consumed by the absolute desolation of being is always the numbing same, without workdays nor holidays, without yesterday or tomorrow. There is only the desperate, scrambling now from which there is no escape. Even the most basic act of dying loses its personal character: there is no life and there is no death.³⁴ It is the total loss of power over one’s own autonomy. It is the total surrender to the nothingness of being, without being able to defend oneself anymore.

(...) Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmänner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

*They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one Image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen.*³⁵

Likewise, the very act of suicide loses its significance as the ultimate act of freedom. When man is absorbed by being, he can no longer take his own life. After all, suicide presupposes a meaningful subject. It is as if Hitlerism understood this when it had signs installed in the camps with the following message: “Jews who wish to hang themselves are requested to put a name card in their mouth to facilitate identification.” In such a way, Nazism delivered man to a fatal immortality.

³² Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*, 38-39.

³³ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*, 57.

³⁴ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*, 239; Robert Plant, “Levinas and the Holocaust: a Reconstruction,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2014): 44-79.

³⁵ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz and the Reawakening: Two Memoires*, translated by Stuart Woolf (New York, the United States: Summit Books, 1982). Cited in Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive*, 44.

Martyrdom also became virtually impossible in Auschwitz. Every human act lost its meaning:

*This value of example, this crystallizing virtue that it possesses in human communities, was reduced to nothing in the camps. A Gandhi would have become the object of general ridicule. It is the generalized passivity of the prisoners that is most striking. (...) This obedience reached a real automation.*³⁶

This is *Endlösung* (in English: ‘Final Solution’) in the strictest sense of the word: everything loses its identity and is dissolved into the nothingness of being.³⁷ It is Holocaust in the etymological sense of the word: total annihilation by the (all-consuming) fire. Nazism is also called an anarchist totalitarianism. Auschwitz is an anarchic system: that is, when one enters, no one or nothing is the beginning (*arche*) or end, everything floats around, drowning in total disorientation. Totalitarian means an individual loses all that is personal to him or her in order to be submitted to the totality of being without name.

For Levinas, then, the Holocaust is unique in the strictest sense of the word:

*Among the millions of human beings who encountered misery and death, the Jews alone experienced a total dereliction. They experienced a condition inferior to that of things, an experience of total passivity, an experience of Passion.*³⁸

*To differentiate between different forms of human suffering is certainly not allowed. But Claudel cannot look away from a suffering that is experienced as the abandonment of everything and everyone, a suffering at the limit of all suffering, a suffering that suffers all sufferings. That is no doubt what he is referring to when, without being flippant or guilty of trotting out a tired cliché, he uses the term ‘holocaust’.*³⁹

³⁶ In French : “Cette valeur de l’exemple, cette vertu cristallisatrice qu’il possède dans les collectivités humaines, se trouvaient dans les camps réduits à néant. Une Gandhi y serait devenue l’objet de la risée générale. C’est la passivité généralisée des détenus qui frappe surtout. (...) Cette obéissance atteignait une véritable automatisation.” Poliakov, *Breviaire de la Haine*, 252-255.

³⁷ Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence*, 45.

³⁸ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 11-12.

³⁹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 129-130.

Levinas attacks, in rather sharp terms, the young socialist who, in the fervor of his trade union activities, dares to compare the situation in the Renault factories with the situation in Auschwitz.⁴⁰

The consequence of this total de-subjectification is for Levinas ‘horror’ (in French: *horreur*).⁴¹ Being weighs on you like fatal despair. As a human being, you disappear as an exponent of an anonymous event where you can no longer be human. Nazism is a diabolical power that engulfs everything. In 1934, Levinas wrote an article titled, *La philosophie de l’hitlerisme*.⁴² One will not find it in his own bibliography because Levinas later distanced himself from (the title of) this article. After all, how can one call Nazism a system, or a philosophy? On the contrary, the diabolical reverses every system into its opposite. Therefore, for Levinas, Hitlerism is the anti-system, the anti-state *par excellence*, an *Unwelt* (a non-world), an *Ungrund*⁴³ where all things and people are perverted into being without more⁴⁴.

Being, for Levinas, is fundamental mischief. It is the unruly, hostile, faceless matter. In the Holocaust, we also see this ever-present, inescapable being reflected in the materiality of the dead. Who is not familiar with the images of heaps of corpses: women, children, and the elderly, a shapeless accumulation of arms, legs, and heads? Throughout the crime of Auschwitz, the *il y a* returned irreversibly in this shapeless but material specter.

⁴⁰ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 222.

⁴¹ Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*, 38-39.

⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, “Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l’hitlerisme,” *Esprit* 3, no. 26 (1934): 199-208.

⁴³ James McLachlan, *The il y a and the Ungrund: Levinas and the Russian Existentialist Berdyaev and Shestov*, in *Levinas Studies* 11(2016)213-235.

⁴⁴ Samuel Moyn, “Judaism against Paganism. Emmanuel Levinas’ Response to Heidegger and Nazism in the 1930s”, in *History and Memory* 10(1)(1998)25-58, p. 35-36: “The very title of Levinas’ article, “Some reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” which appeared in *Esprit* in early 1934, suggests that for its author the issue of coming to terms with National Socialism had special, metaphysical stakes. In later years, Levinas excluded these reflections from his list of publications, regretting an attribution of philosophical status to his subject that conferred on it a dignity he did not think it deserved (A. Peperzak, 1993, 3)”. Cfr. Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. West Lafayette, the United States: Purdue University Press, 1993, 3.

With this approach to being, Levinas' philosophy clearly stands in reaction against Heidegger's thinking.⁴⁵ For Heidegger, 'light 'is being.'⁴⁶ However, Levinas fought against the depersonalizing forces of nature during his punishment camp in the forest. He did not become a nature lover, but a city person. Nature, after all, is also formless wriggling and rock-hard *struggle for life*.⁴⁷ Insofar as there is a (philosophical) affinity between Heidegger and Nazism, it must be sought in his anti-Levinasian conception of being. If being as primordial ground gives itself as a grace in nature, then we are not far from condoning the way in which being 'gives itself' in the historical form of fascist blood and soil theory. For Levinas himself, however, Heidegger remains one of the greatest philosophers in history, and his relation to National Socialism is a catastrophe that does not explain his philosophy. Far more painful than his philosophy, for Levinas, is the fact that in his spiritual testament, Heidegger does not say a word about the Holocaust.⁴⁸

The starting point of Levinas's thinking is thus not 'God' or 'the face', but the experience of the radical negation of the face in which God speaks.⁴⁹ This also explains Levinas' dislike of all sacred deities. In the enthusiasm of religious ecstasy, the subject is destroyed, and he or she finds him/herself in the grip of the divine, a (non-biblical) anonymous power and not 'opposite'. In relation to this *il y a*-tic divineness, Levinas' position is nothing more than atheism.

⁴⁵ Burggraave, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 193-194.

⁴⁶ Michael Fagenblat, "Levinas and Heidegger: The Elemental Confrontation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford, United Kingdom: University Press, 2019), 6-9.

⁴⁷ Roger Burggraave, "Twisting Ways, Emmanuel Levinas on How not to Talk about God," in *Debating Levinas' Legacy*, ed. Andris Breitling, Chris Bremmers, and Arthur Cools (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 115.

⁴⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "La mémoire d'une passe non résolue. Entretien avec Foulek Ringelheim," *Revue de l'université de Bruxelles* no.1-2 (1987): 11-20. According to Levinas, much of the data that Farias provides regarding Heidegger's relationship to Nazism has been known for a long time. For Levinas, it is much worse that Heidegger does not mention Nazism in his interview with *Spiegel*. For Levinas, this is far worse than joining Nazism during its prime. Indeed, such participation often results from opportunism and latent threats. See also: Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 49; Burggraave, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 61; Fagenblat, "Levinas and Heidegger," 9-11; Emmanuel Levinas, "Comme un consentement à l'horrible," *Le nouvel observateur* 1211(1988), 82-83.

⁴⁹ Burggraave, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping, Gods passie en de ander, vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas*, 273-277.

The question now becomes: how does one escape the *il y a* that continuously threatens human existence? Even before World War II, in 1935, Levinas had raised the question of *De l'évasion*: how to escape the imminent premonition of *les angoisses de la guerre qui approchait* (“the anguishes of the approaching war”).⁵⁰ However, with the *de facto* apocalyptic revolution of nihilism in the following years (1939-1945), the question becomes even more stringent.

3. The Hypostasis or the Unbearable Heaviness of Existence

The human subject does not want to be reduced to a no-body or no-thing. The massive, overwhelming being-no-more can only be overcome if a being arises in the being itself, which breaks open the fullness of being by appropriating the being in such a way that it can exist separately. This is the movement *de l'existence à l'existant* (‘from existence to existing’). Levinas calls this dynamic of subject-making by appropriation of being the “hypostasis”.⁵¹

Therefore, for Levinas, becoming human is an evolutive, self-stepping movement, whereas to Heidegger, becoming human means searching through the beings for being.

Hypostasis is ‘being born to oneself’ by ‘conquering “being”’. Suddenly a point emerges that tears itself away from the *il y a* and contracts into itself.⁵² Levinas tells Poirié how this miracle of hypostasis happened to him during his imprisonment under Nazism. A small dog joined the group of Jewish prisoners he was part of and accompanied them to work. The guards allowed it and the dog settled in the labor camp. When the group returned from work in the evening, the dog would happily jump up and bark to welcome them.

*In this corner of Germany where, while crossing the village, we were looked at by the inhabitants as ‘Juden’, this dog was obviously taking us for men.*⁵³

⁵⁰ Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 82.

⁵¹ Pollefeyt, “Theology as Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas as Jewish Post-Holocaust Thinker,” 325.

⁵² Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*, 18-20.

⁵³ “Dans ce coin d’Allemagne ou, en traversant le village, nous étions regardés par les habitants comme Juden, ce chien nous prenant évidemment pour des hommes.”

No longer to be called under the general, destructive heading of *Juden*, but to be recognized as independent (human) being within being; that is the 'happiness' of hypostasis. When the *Wehrmacht* understood how the dog contributed to this process, the animal was mercilessly slaughtered.

The (few) uprisings that took place in the various camps can be seen as a refusal of the *il y a*, as an attempt at mastery of being (*conatus essendi*). For example, on August 2, 1943, an armed uprising erupted in Treblinka. Some of the installations went up in smoke, and 135 members of the *Sonderkommando* managed to escape. In October 1943, a number of Jews revolted and killed 10 SS men, and after this revolt, the camp was closed.⁵⁴ The hypostasis is to break free from the murderous being and to establish oneself 'in arms'. It is the first place of freedom: not by coming out of oneself (*Dasein*) (Heidegger) but by setting oneself as origin (*arche*) against all an-archy.

The hypostasis as *être pour soi* is the refusal of the depersonalizing, numinous forces of being. It is an atheistic act, an act of masculinity: going into oneself, like the monad with Leibniz, without windows or doors.

The identity that is conquered in hypostasis, however, is not a harmless, feather-light relationship with itself, but immediately turns, dialectically, into a complete falling back on itself. *Être pour soi* ("to be for oneself") also means *être avec soi*; ("to be against oneself"): sovereignty also implies being chained to oneself.⁵⁵ How being 'sticks' to the subject is best expressed in the (anti-Semitic) decay. On this, Levinas writes:

*Indeed, it is an absolute persecution because its intention paralyzes any form of escape, makes impossible in advance any possible conversion, forbids any surrender or apostasy, in the etymological sense of the term, and thereby strikes the very being called back to its deepest identity in its innocence.*⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Poliakov, *Breviaire de la haine*, 225. An analysis of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising would be particularly illuminating here.

⁵⁵ Burggraave, "Twisting Ways, Emmanuel Levinas on How not to Talk about God," 115.

⁵⁶ "Immers, deze is een absolute vervolging, omdat haar intentie iedere vorm van vluchten verlamt, bij voorbaat elke mogelijke bekering onmogelijk maakt, elke overgave of apostasie, in de etymologische zin van de term, verbiedt en hierdoor het tot zijn diepste identiteit teruggeroepen wezen juist in zijn onschuld treft." Levinas, *Het menselijk gelaat*, 36.

The Jew of the 20th century, more than anyone else, felt the fatality of hypostasis.⁵⁷ For the Jew in an anti-Semitic *Zeitgeist*, the central issue is not the fear of nothingness (Heidegger), but the fear of having to be there. For example, Anne Frank can ‘go into hiding’ but she cannot eliminate herself or transform herself into a spiritual, intangible substance. To be human (‘hypostasis’) is to be trapped within oneself. Human identity includes an aspect of definitiveness that cannot be escaped.

Under the Hitler regime, the Jew did not have to do anything to be punished; *being* a Jew was already a sufficient ground for punishment.⁵⁸ Under Nazism, an entire group of people became guilty, not by their actions, but by their very existence.⁵⁹ This makes the Jewish fate very unique (perhaps only comparable with the fate of the Gypsies). In a number of camps, colored stars were applied to the uniforms of the prisoners. These pointed to the ‘crime’ committed: political activism, homosexuality, etc. Only the yellow Star of David referred to something one had not ‘done’ (with the possible expectation of the Gypsies). A number of Jews walked around with two stars.

Another characteristic here is the scholastic precision with which the Nazi regime defined its victim: “Anyone, whose great-grandfather had registered as a Jew, is a Jew”.⁶⁰ When this description is converted into legal terms and operationalized bureaucratically, it becomes irreversible.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Burggraave, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping, Gods passie en de ander, vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas*, 267.

⁵⁸ Peter J. Giannopoulos, “Levinas’s Philosophy of Transcendence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford, the United Kingdom: University Press, 2019), 5, 11.

⁵⁹ Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence*, 61.

⁶⁰ Emil L. Fackenheim, *La présence de Dieu dans l’histoire: Affirmations juives et réflexions philosophiques après Auschwitz*, translated by Marguerite Delmotte, and Bernard Dupuy (Lagrasse, France: Verdier, 1980), 124.

⁶¹ Here, consideration could be given to *la violence de l’administration*. However necessary it is for the state system to limit the war of all against all, nevertheless, the Holocaust teaches us how its bureaucracy can reintroduce individuals into the depersonalizing *il y a*. Levinas will therefore always argue for ‘*la petite bonté, une justice toujours meilleure en miséricorde derrière la justice*’. This also helps us to understand Levinas’ attitude toward the state of Israel. On the one hand, Israel is the necessary condition to protect the Jew (structurally) from the aggressiveness of *homo lupus*. Yet the Zionist realization can never be the messianic completion of (Jewish) history. Thus, although the Jewish state is ethical in basis, it must always remain open to being questioned from its own (ethical) source. A state system (even if motivated by

Being a Jew becomes the prototype of the inescapable bondage to oneself. One's own identity can no longer be escaped. Poliakov writes about this:

*The Jews designated for deportation were notified by individual summons, sometimes one or two weeks in advance. As the possibilities of escape or camouflage were almost non-existent, few of them evaded the summons.*⁶²

The original salvation of the hypostasis revolves around this dialectically, namely, into the obstruction 'of itself by itself'. It is at this place that we find a description of disgust (*la nausée*) in Levinas' work. I am me and I cannot be anyone else. Disgust is the stomach turning on itself. It is the experience of standing against the wall of one's own being where every evasion is illusory.

During World War II, disgust for one's being gained an unparalleled manifestation in the materiality of the (physical) suffering of the Jewish people.⁶³ Suffering is the filthy being thrown back into one's own identity without doors or windows. It is the terrible, carnal way of being with oneself. Suffering ridicules the will: there is no possibility of rationalization or distancing. You are thrown back on yourself inextricably and sharply. For Levinas, the zenith of all human suffering is reached in the Holocaust:

*Tearing up of the lived experience, preventing one from gathering in meaning, from being thought of... and to get out of oneself. Sensitivity also dedicated to itself - my pain, in me, in my body.*⁶⁴

the Holocaust) can never be absolutized but must always be exceeded by responsibility for the concrete misery of the concrete human being who is oppressed by the system. This position allows us to stand up for the right of the Palestinian people without denying the necessity of the State of Israel. A system, no matter how ethical in origin, can always turn against itself. This is, among other things, the fate of Stalinism: in the name of well-meaning compassion, it became fascist. In a way, for Levinas, Stalinism is an even greater scandal than fascism. After all, it is more difficult to question because it has an ethical ground. Fascism, on the other hand, is pure, diabolic *Wille zur Macht* ('will to power').

⁶² "Les Juifs désignés pour la déportation étaient avertis par convocations individuelles, parfois une ou deux semaines à l'avance. Les possibilités d'évasion ou de camouflage étant presque nulles, peu nombreux étaient ceux qui s'y dérobaient." Poliakov, *Breviaire de la haine*, 168-169.

⁶³ Eaglestone, "Levinas and the Holocaust," 6-7.

⁶⁴ "Déchirement du vécu, empêche de se rassembler en sens, de se faire penser de... et de sortir de soi. Sensibilité aussi vouée à elle-même — ma douleur, en moi, dans mon corps." Emmanuel Levinas, "Emmanuel Levinas," In *Le*

In suffering, an individual can so coincide with themselves that any protest becomes impossible.

*The 'coup du salut', an S.S. amusement in vogue at certain times, consisted of disheveling a prisoner's hair and throwing his cap beyond the sentry chain, into the zone of shooting on sight, after which the prisoner was ordered to go and get it, regularly, the victim complied.*⁶⁵

At this point, we will assess the link between suffering and death for Levinas. Death is a release from suffering. In this sense, suffering is actually a greater calamity than death. For example, in Holocaust literature, we often find the idea that those at Auschwitz sent by Dr. Josef Mengele to the 'right' (that is, to the crematorium), suffered a 'less tragic' fate than those who were sent to the 'left' (that is, to a labor camp).

The question of liberation gets a new turn: from 'salvation for me' to 'liberation of me.' The question now becomes one of salvation 'from me', without, however, being destroyed by death. Only now does the individual become an outward movement in Levinas' philosophy. The individual looks for an alterity that can liberate him or her from him/herself without destroying its identity.

Is there a promise hidden in labor? The Nazis hinted at this when they had the famous phrase, *Arbeit Macht Frei* ("Work Makes One Free"), affixed above the entrance to the main camps in Auschwitz.

An oft-repeated maxim in Auschwitz ran something along the lines of the following: "The road to liberation includes four milestones: work, fairness, discipline, and patriotism!" That labor would make free, however, was never such an illusion as it was during the Holocaust. The most inhumane labor resulted in extreme exhaustion. *Sonderkommandos* had to gas themselves after weeks of toil. The *Kapos* who, through incredible brutality and a total lack of scrupulosity, become a part of the SS system, were regularly 'replaced'.

Labor involves the persistence of the self. The world is reduced to an extension of one's own survival. This is how the I, along the detour of the

scandale du mal. Catastrophes naturelles et crimes de l'homme, ed. Paul Ricœur, Bernard Dupuy, and Emmanuel Levinas (Paris, France: Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1986), 15.

⁶⁵ "Le 'coup du salut', amusement S.S. en vogue à certaines époques, consistait à décoiffer un détenu et à projeter son salut au-delà de la chaîne sentinelles, dans la zone de tir à vue, après quoi il était ordonné au prisonnier d'aller le chercher, régulièrement, la victime s'exécutait..." Poliakov, *Breviaire de la haine*, 253.

world, falls back into itself. One's bondage to oneself is not broken, but on the contrary, it is increased, since the self is now not only burdened by itself, but also by the world. In this sense we must also understand the motto of the Buchenwald concentration camp: *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* ("Extermination through Labor").⁶⁶

For Levinas, labor is not the solution to the quest for salvation. If an individual really wants to be liberated from him/herself, he or she will have to encounter an alterity that is so radically different that it cannot be reduced to the self. Only then will the individual be liberated from him/herself and yet not cease to exist. But does such an alterity even exist in and after Auschwitz?

4. Auschwitz and the Power of the Powerless

The hypostasis creates a private domain in the endless sea of being. The power of being also implies the burden of being. An individual presents himself or herself as the first and last principle of reality. Ego-centrism is therefore not an accidental characteristic of being human, but an essentially constitutive (pre-ethical) element of the personality. An individual is reductively and profitably oriented toward reality. Here we come to one of the most painful aspects of the Holocaust. In the concentration camps, there was a grim *struggle for life* amongst the prisoners. The horrors to which they were exposed made them wolves (Hobbes) to each other. They betrayed each other for the sake of (often imagined) personal benefits, they fought for a piece of bread, they tore the crusts off each other's wounds for the sake of hunger, they killed each other so they could eat meat.

Thus, we see how the final sealing of hypostasis forces an individual to become a being of *Wille zur Macht*.⁶⁷ *Arbeit Macht Frei* is a cynical lie: in labor, an individual greedily takes whatever can serve his or her attempt at being, and thus he or she returns to him/herself once again.⁶⁸ It becomes increasingly clear that an individual cannot free him/herself. It is like being stuck in quicksand. The more you struggle against it, the more it sucks you in.⁶⁹ The individual therefore becomes a supplicant for

⁶⁶ Ludo van Eck, *Het boek der kampen* (Leuven, Belgium: Kritak, 1979), 91.

⁶⁷ Pollefeyt, "Theology as Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas as Jewish Post-Holocaust Thinker," 330.

⁶⁸ Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence*, 57.

⁶⁹ This thought allows us to better understand Hitler's personal life destiny. As a living incarnation of the Nietzschean *Wille zur Macht*, he sought to subject everything to his ('Aryan') self. What he as *Führer* could not reduce to an exaltation of himself had to be eradicated. But the real does not allow itself to

liberation from him/herself. And if I cannot liberate myself, there must be something outside of me that can liberate me from myself, without me having to give up the mastery of being acquired with so much effort on the *il y a*.

The ultimate cruelty of fascism is a fundamental revelation of a degenerate, self-serving *Wille zur Macht*. Here we reach the core of Levinas' description of Hitlerism. Nazism reduces everything else to the same thing. It is a politics without ethics that destroys everything that does not suit it. It is the attempt at being that radically universalizes itself and eliminates every 'other' that does not fit in the name of itself.

In their totalizing desire to destroy everything that did not fit into their own conception of existence, the Nazis spared nothing and no one, not even children. They killed them, along with their parents, in groups or individually. They massacred them in children's homes, buried them alive, threw them into fire, pierced them with bayonets, allowed dogs to tear them apart, poisoned them, drowned them, and strangled them. They conducted sexual and medical experiments on children, they 'interrogated' them in the torture chambers of the *Gestapo* and extermination camps. They let them die of deprivation, poor care, and hunger.⁷⁰

In Auschwitz, it became clear, in an extreme way, how the Other can be fatally destroyed.⁷¹ Here we reach a crucial turning point in Levinas' thinking: the vulnerability of the Other. The appearance of the Other in my circle of being creates the possibility of murder and destruction. We often shun the documents of extermination camps because they reveal precisely the full capacities of human beings. But it is precisely the viewing of, for example, KZ photographs, that reveals to me what (I) am capable of, and what (I) am not allowed to do.

Here we come to a universal phenomenon in the study of the Holocaust: the reflective consciousness immediately discovers itself as a moral consciousness. Escape from this is not possible. Only 'revisionism', which, in the name of 'freedom of speech', denies the existence of the Holocaust,

be reduced to an exponent of its own self-serving self-exaltation, despite the most degenerate attempts. Hitler's suicide was, therefore, the extreme consequence of his inability to accept the invincibility of reality. Because of its reductive attitude towards reality, fascism compels itself to suicide, drowning itself in the (anarchistic) *il y a* so desired by it.

⁷⁰ For information on the situation of children in the camps, see: van Eck, *Het boek der kampen*, 117.

⁷¹ Eaglestone, "Levinas and the Holocaust," 6-7.

can walk around Auschwitz in a great arc.⁷² However, such a view is not only marked by a fundamental *mauvaise foi* ('bad faith'), but also opens new possibilities for the future abuse of power.⁷³

The Holocaust evokes such paradoxical feelings because the discovery of (my) power cannot be separated from the fact that this appropriated power is illegitimate. The Other who emerges causes a crisis in my ontology: the entirety of my heroic struggle for self-development is radically overturned. The face, as the incarnated vulnerability of the Other, not only thwarts my 'fascist' imperialism, which tries to make everything subservient to my existential project, but also questions this selfishness in principle. Auschwitz therefore confronts us with this fundamental question: are we wolves to each other (Hobbes) or are we each other's guardians (Cain)?⁷⁴

This has also been a real experience in the camps. There the 'face' received a millionfold incarnation in a people tormented to death. It became clear how the face of the Other is the temptation to murder. Yet many prisoners refused to play this deadly game. They experienced that one can say 'yes' to the terror of egocentrism, but that one must say 'no' when it comes to the violation of human dignity.

Here we come to the core of Levinas' philosophy: the face of the Other that appeals to my freedom.⁷⁵ My freedom is no longer a neutral, non-committal choice between two equivalent alternatives, or a gateway to pure egocentric decisions; it receives another orientation, a new

⁷² Ingrid Anderson, *Ethics and Suffering since the Holocaust. Making Ethics 'First Philosophy' in Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein*, (United States: Milton Park, Routledge, 2019), chapter 2.

⁷³ On the topic of revisionism, Levinas writes: "It is extremely important to oppose the attempts of the revisionists who take advantage of the forgetfulness, it is important to maintain the pure memory of the facts for the truth of the Holocaust. But the essential thing is to always find the actuality of the teachings of the Shoah from our new experiences." "Il est extrêmement important de s'opposer aux tentatives des révisionnistes qui profitent de l'oubli, il est important de maintenir le pur souvenir des faits pour la vérité de la shoah. Mais l'essentiel est de trouver toujours l'actualité des enseignements de la shoah à partir de nos expériences nouvelles." See: Emmanuel Levinas, "La mémoire d'un passe non révolu," *Revue de l'université de Bruxelles* no. 1-2 (1987): 14.

⁷⁴ Burggraave, *Het gelaat van de bevrijding*, 167.

⁷⁵ Burggraave, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping, Gods passie en de ander; vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas*, 273-277; Diane Perpich, "Levinas and the Face of the Other," in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford, the United Kingdom: University Press, 2019).

direction, namely the responsibility for the other.⁷⁶ In this way, the sudden appearance of the face starts to unleash an ethical response movement, through which I am drawn out of myself in an endless manner. I find myself set on fire by the Other and I never come back to myself. I become an extraverted stream of self-deprivation. Yet I do not lapse into the *il y a* because in the nonsense of senseless being direction and meaning is brought in.

For example, during the ‘death marches’ the young supported the old; fathers saved the scant food from their mouths for their sons; women decided in the hell of Auschwitz to give a chance to the unborn and gave birth to children there; men defended the rights of pregnant women; women stood up so that they could get their food, and that of their children, in a humane way instead of picking it up from the mud. People risked their lives and escaped the inferno with the sole drive to tell the story to the world outside.

For Levinas, true human liberation, even in Auschwitz, lies in this: the freedom of conscience, being stimulated and challenged by the suffering of the Other. Authentic existence, then, for Levinas, is not a *Sein-zum-Tode* (Heidegger). After all, my own death becomes unimportant considering the suffering and death of the Other. Human rights are originally the rights of the other person.⁷⁷ In this responsibility lies the promise of release from a suffocating rootedness in myself. Here, a fundamental human possibility also reveals itself: holiness. Evil is possible, but so is holiness!⁷⁸

Two Poles had killed an SS man whilst escaping. The commander immediately ordered that one man in 10 be hanged from the labor group to which the escapees belonged. Those designated to be hanged all remained dignified. Except one. That one went mad with fear. Fell to his knees. Screamed that he had a wife and children. That he was too young to die. Then a Polish priest came forward and kindly offered himself to be hanged in the other man's

⁷⁶ Roger Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other. A Multidimensional Ethic of Responsibility in Levinas* (Bangalore, India: Dharmaram Publications, 2009); Roger Burggraeve, “When in the ‘Brother’ the Stranger is Acknowledged: From Identity to Alterity and Dialogue, according to Emmanuel Levinas,” *Dharma Research Association* 43, no. 3 (2019): 12.

⁷⁷ On the topics of *conatus essendi*, human rights, and the egoism of National Socialism, see: Emmanuel Levinas, Guy Petitdemange, and Jacques Rolland, *Autrement que savoir* (Paris, France: Osiris, 1987), 60-61.

⁷⁸ Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 102.

*place. The SS officer on duty said, smiling kindly, 'Ja, bitte' pointing to the gallows. And the priest was hanged.*⁷⁹

The name of this priest was Maximilian Kolbe. For this act he would later be canonized in the Catholic church. He can serve as a model for those countless people who, during these years, turned to others in a self-forgetting focus. He stands for all those who chose to die without blood on their hands, and who gave themselves to the utmost. Their death was a final testimony of humanity where, as never before in history, any form of humanity was absent.

*Men and women, young and old, used their last strength to die with dignity. No one begged for mercy. They all had a last cry, or a last disdainful look, or a last curse. Those cries made the watching SS men laugh, but it was manufactured laughter. It made them nervous. It did not match the propaganda, which said that the Jews were dying, weeping with cowardice.*⁸⁰

Herein lies a real promise of redemption from the oppressive gravity of existence. After all, the Other invades my existence, he or she comes from a different place and it is precisely the refusal to be reduced to a function of my own self. I am called upon in my responsibility to protect and promote the other in their alterity.⁸¹

⁷⁹ “Twee Polen hadden tijdens een ontvluchting een S.S.-man gedood. De commandant gaf onmiddellijk bevel één man op de tien op te hangen van het arbeidscommando waartoe de ontvluchten behoorden. De kameraden die werden aangewezen om opgehangen te worden bleven allemaal waardig. Behalve één. Die werd gek van angst. Viel op zijn knieën. Schreeuwde dat hij vrouw en kinderen had. Dat hij te jong was om te sterven. Toen is een Poolse priester naar voor gekomen en heeft gezegd dat hij zichzelf aanbood om in de plaats van de andere man opgehangen te worden. De S.S.-officier van dienst zei, vriendelijk-lachend: ‘Ja, bitte’ wijzend naar de galg. En de priester werd opgehangen.” Testimony of Kazimierz Orchanck, number 125,601 in: van Eck, *Het boek der kampen*, 208.

⁸⁰ “Mannen en vrouwen, jong en oud, die hun laatste krachten gebruikten om waardig te sterven. Niemand smeekte om genade. Ze hadden allemaal een laatste kreet, of een laatste misprijzende blik, of een laatste scheldwoord. Die kreten deden de kijkende S.S.-mannen lachen maar het was gemaakt lachen. Het maakte hen nerveus. Het klopte niet met de propaganda, die zei dat de joden stierven, huilend van lafheid.” Testimony of Kazimierz Orchanck, number 125,601 in: van Eck, *Het boek der kampen*, 204.

⁸¹ Burggraave, “When in the ‘Brother’ the Stranger is Acknowledged: From Identity to Alterity and Dialogue, According to Emmanuel Levinas,” 15; Burggraave, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping*,

In the same line, the Viennese psychiatrist, Viktor Emil Frankl, himself a survivor of Auschwitz, points out how the most important factor for survival was precisely located in a ‘task outside one’s own skin’. He discovered that one could only increase the inner resistance of camp prisoners if one could make them believe in a goal: something that they still had to do after liberation; someone waiting for them, such as a fiancée, wife, or children; someone who counted on them or whom they should not disappoint under any circumstances; a task waiting for them; or, an idea they still wanted to work out. He found that there were prisoners who continued to live when, according to the calculations, they should already have died.⁸² He so discovered that it is not so much what we should expect from life as what life should expect from us. A prisoner who was totally indifferent to his surroundings became stunted and soon showed the first signs of physical and mental decay.⁸³

There was a belief in the camps that people of certain nationalities were stronger than others. The Polish, German, and Slovakian Jews were said to be more strongly attached to life than the French, for example. The Dutch, Greek, and Italian Jews came in last place. According to Poliakov, however, the determining factor was strictly individual, namely the

Gods passie en de ander, vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas, 273-277; Eaglestone, “Levinas and the Holocaust,” 6.

⁸² Roger Burggraeve, *Barst van levensvreugde. Het verhaal van elke mens als kleine profet* (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 1979), 107.

⁸³ However, many psychologists have developed an opposing view. According to them, it was only possible to survive Auschwitz if one surrendered totally to the system, became totally insensitive to the suffering of others, and identified with the executioners. For a large number of prisoners, this seemed to be the case. However, many of these people died (or were institutionalized) shortly after ‘liberation’ because their identification with the system had been so integral that the bankruptcy of their executioners was equivalent to their own bankruptcy. Insofar as these insights are correct, they cannot be included in a search for the true opportunities for liberation for the individual in distress. Even if, on the other hand, the cases described by Frankl are in the minority, they do, in my opinion, offer a chance for real human liberation. This view is then contradicted by those who believe that another factor worked adaptively, namely, not hoping for liberation, but trying to live without any specific future prospects. Those who tried to survive from day to day with the sole aim of achieving an undefined, free future had the best chance of not collapsing on the day of liberation. Those who lived only with the desire to experience the liberation were in great danger of dropping dead at the liberation itself. After all, the goal of liberation had been achieved; there was no more energy to resume living.

physical and moral resilience of each prisoner.⁸⁴ Similarly, Wiesel's *Night* is in fact the story of the power of devotion as the source of life.

My father's presence was the only thing that stopped me (from committing suicide). He was running next to me, out of breath, out of strength, desperate. I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his sole support.

He seemed to be burning up with a fever. I fought my way to the coffee cauldron like a wild beast. And I succeeded in bringing back a cup. I took one gulp. The rest was for him. I shall never forget the gratitude that shone in his eyes when he swallowed this beverage. The gratitude of a wounded animal. With these few mouthfuls of hot water, I had probably given him more satisfaction than during my entire childhood...

I remained in Buchenwald until April 11. I shall not describe my life during that period. It no longer mattered. Since my father's death, nothing mattered to me anymore.⁸⁵

This extract from *Night* also demonstrates Levinas' idea of how the Other revalues my attempt at liberation. In the creative realization of my responsibility, I do not have to deny or suppress myself. My own self-development is the only thing in my power that I can invest in. My (originally self-serving) energy must not be obscured, but transformed, inverted into availability for the Other. Wiesel realizes only too well the (ethical) duty to develop himself for the sake of his father. He moves mountains to 'win' a cup of warm water, he drinks one sip himself, and gives the rest to his father.

At this point, we arrive with Levinas on a definitive track of liberation. To withdraw from the *il y a*, the I had to affirm itself: this is the (ego-centric) act of the *hypostasis*. Only by being re-oriented through the disinterested relation with the other is the I freed from itself and yet not killed. The face of the Other is the face of liberation.⁸⁶ Whoever tries to win him/herself, whoever makes him/herself into a being whose being is only about his or her own being, will lose him/herself. However, the individual who dares to lose him/herself for the sake of the Other will win him/herself.

⁸⁴ Poliakov, *Breviaire de la haine*, 250.

⁸⁵ Wiesel, *Night*, 86, 106-107, 113.

⁸⁶ Hence the title of Burggraeve's tekst: *Het gelaat van de bevrijding. Een heilsdenken in het spoor van Emmanuel Levinas* (The Face of Liberation: A Salvation Thinking in the Footsteps of Emmanuel Levinas).

5. God on the Gallows

Human beings are able to act on the original language of the face. This also implies that an individual does not necessarily function at the level of responsibility. Nazism is the prototype of this refusal of moral responsibility.⁸⁷ Ethics is for the weak. The aversion and refusal to the ethical commandment of the face is what Levinas calls (the real possibility of) evil.⁸⁸

Now, if it goes wrong, one should not count on Levinas to pull God out of his philosophical magic box. For Levinas, after all, if an individual refuses his or her sacred responsibility, there is no God to come and straighten out his or her crooked lines in His omnipotence. Responsibility is therefore (literally) blood-serious and irreversible. It is not in omnipotence that God originally reveals himself.⁸⁹ I am absolutely responsible, and the first to be responsible.⁹⁰ Levinas borrows the following statement from Dostoyevsky, “Each of us is guilty to all, and I more than all others.”⁹¹ An intervention from God would undermine this human responsibility.

Nor does Levinas wish to promote a God who promises eternal (heavenly) happiness. Such a divine promise can offer no consolation to those who are victims of the irresponsible actions of others.

The rejection of any *deus ex machina* fits into Levinas’s broader rejection of any post-Holocaust theodicy.⁹² The theodicy project tries to save God’s omnipotence and love in the face of human suffering. In Auschwitz, however, the sky has shown itself to be emptier than ever. Since then, it is no longer possible to justify or excuse God.⁹³ He writes:

⁸⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity press, 1989), 184.

⁸⁸ Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence*, 99.

⁸⁹ Levinas, “La mémoire d’un passe non révolu,” 17.

⁹⁰ Burggraave, “Twisting Ways, Emmanuel Levinas on How not to Talk about God,” 124-126.

⁹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (The Hague, the Netherlands: Nijhoff, 1974), 186. Cited in Roger Burggraave, *Van zelfontplooiing naar verantwoordelijkheid. Een ethische lezing van het verlangen: ontmoeting tussen psychoanalyse en Levinas* (Leuven, Belgium: Acco, 1981), 70.

⁹² Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 182.

⁹³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Le 614^e commandement,” *Arche* 291 (1981): 55.

*Once again, Israel found itself at the heart of the world's religious history, exploding the perspectives into which established religions had locked themselves.*⁹⁴

Levinas makes a distinction between 'traditional evil' which, in all its gravity, can still be 'controlled' by theodicy, and, on the other hand, the arbitrary, evil for evil's sake, without defender or answer, of an evil dismissed of all sanctions, stronger than any omnipresent, merciful omnipotence, and more powerful than any theodicy.⁹⁵ It is the Jewish people who suffered this last evil under Hitler, although the meaning of its suffering is universal.⁹⁶

Suffering in Auschwitz is suffering 'for nothing'. It makes speaking and thinking in terms of, for example, 'punishment for sin' not only impossible but also haughty. Auschwitz reveals the unaccountable and unjustifiable character of the suffering of the other human being. Standing before the gas chambers and crematory ovens in Auschwitz, it is extremely problematic, and even 'blasphemous', to think of the sinfulness of Israel or of the heavenly reward God has devised to cover this suffering. What a fundamental imbalance between the theological answers on the one hand and evil for evil's sake on the other!⁹⁷

For Levinas, the possibility of Auschwitz thus radically questions an age-old tradition of theodicy. In the camps, Nietzsche's words, "God is dead", took on a quasi-empirical meaning.⁹⁸ If "the burning children of Auschwitz" are the criterion for current theology (as Greenberg puts it) than any apology from God in the form of theodicy has become forever impossible.

⁹⁴ "Opnieuw bevond Israël zich in het hart van de religieuze geschiedenis van de wereld, doordat het de perspectieven waarin de gevestigde religies zich hadden opgesloten tot ontploffing bracht." Levinas, *Het menselijk gelaat*, 36.

⁹⁵ Levinas, "Emmanuel Levinas," 15; Bilyana Martinovski, "The Ethical Turn: Communication as a Manifestation of the Ethical," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 2, no.1 (2014): 119-133.

⁹⁶ Eaglestone, "Levinas and the Holocaust," 6-7.

⁹⁷ Levinas, "Le 614^e commandement," 56; Emmanuel Levinas, "La souffrance inutile", in *Emmanuel Lévinas. Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée* 3, ed. Jacques Rolland (Lagrasse, France: Verdier, 1984), 335.

⁹⁸ Although, according to Levinas, Hitler was inspired by Nietzsche, Auschwitz was brought about by the idealistic transcendental philosophy. Nietzsche himself was desperate and his work only announces a time when all human truths were in danger of being lost. A few decades later, this was then realized. See: Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 84.

Therefore, the Holocaust signifies a rupture in the history of salvation: human beings must continue this history in ‘a faith without theodicy’. Auschwitz reveals, with an eye-catching clarity, the radical discrepancy between the entire Western theological thought project and the concrete sufferings of the Holocaust. The so-called secularized theodicies of the human, socio-economic eschatology of history must also make way to the (real) possibility of the end of the world: the universal Holocaust.

Certain theologians (such as Jürgen Moltmann) have considered that they should reverse the category of divine omnipotence and affirm God’s incapacity in the light of Auschwitz. God then becomes the compassionate friend who understands and identifies with the sufferer, but who can do nothing more.

For Levinas, this co-suffering God cannot be the last word either.⁹⁹ A God who only suffers with us still leaves the last and final word to evil and pain. This does not make clear to what extent, how, and especially whether, God is still a liberating and saving God. Then it is not the biblical God but evil that has the definitive omnipotence.

Also in Levinas’ view, God will associate himself with the humble, but not as a powerless, emphatic God who anoints himself with the existing state of injustice, but as the One who, through the horror on the face of the Other, unconditionally demands me to do something about the situation.

So, it is within my responsibility where God comes to mind as the idea of the Good and animates me as the Spirit of the Good within me.¹⁰⁰ God associates himself radically with the humanism of the Other. Religion, therefore, is inseparable from ethical praxis. The more I grow in responsibility, the closer I get to God. The question, then, is not how ethics is possible without God, but rather how God is possible without ethics.¹⁰¹ The whole theodicy project that seeks to justify the pain of the neighbor is not only a source of immorality but is even ungodly. For Levinas, the relation of God is always, and from the outset, ethical. In this sense, we

⁹⁹ Burggraave, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping, Gods passie en de ander, vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas*, 273-277.

¹⁰⁰ Burggraave, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping, Gods passie en de ander, vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas*, 273-277.

¹⁰¹ Burggraave, *Van zelfontplooiing naar verantwoordelijkheid*, 97; Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 182-188.

must also understand the statement “love Torah more than God”.¹⁰² To be toward God is to be toward the Other, and the latter can only be done by following the content of the Torah. Serving God cannot be done without serving one’s neighbor.

So, it is God himself who touches and animates us in the selfless involvement with the Other. The Other is not a reproduction of the self: in his or her capacity as the Other, he or she situates him/herself in a dimension of height, of interruption, of the ideal, of the divine. Thus, through my relation with the Other, I stand in relation with God.¹⁰³ To know God is to know what one should do in relation to the Other. As the Spirit of the Good in me, God breaks through my self-satisfied attachment to myself, in such a way that I free myself in an evasive movement towards the Other, which never returns to its starting point of selfish being.

“I am not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her face I hear the Word of God.”¹⁰⁴

Thus, in the self-serving *il y a*-tic act of being, an *autrement qu’être*, an *au-delà de l’être*, breaks through. For Levinas, God does not show Godself in the terrifying numinous forces of nature. In Levinas’ philosophy, God is an ‘opposite’ who provokes me to make the most of my freedom as a service to the Other.¹⁰⁵ God needs my ‘yes’ to break through the crushing and alienating closedness of the *il y a* and to establish a realm of justice and peace.¹⁰⁶ This is a fundamentally different God from the Nazi *Gott mit uns* that whips man into a blind, pathetic, but utterly irrational enthusiasm, where the charisma of the *Führer* becomes more important than the content of the message, and where God is put before the cart of the (*il y a*-tic) *Wille zur Macht* of the leaders. In relation to such sacred deities, Judaism for Levinas is nothing but atheism.¹⁰⁷

*The other God, on the other hand (...) is a protest against Auschwitz.
And this God appears in the face of the Other. In this sense, God*

¹⁰² Levinas, “La mémoire d’un passe non révolu,” 14.

¹⁰³ Perpich, “Levinas and the Face of the Other,” 5, 16-17.

¹⁰⁴ Levinas cited in Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*, 260.

¹⁰⁵ Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*, 42-43.

¹⁰⁶ Burggraeve, *Het gelaat van de bevrijding*, 217.

¹⁰⁷ Hence, Levinas says: “...The attitude of a humanity that dares to take the risk of atheism - a risk that one must walk but also overcome, and that is the price of maturity.” See: Levinas, “Emmanuel Levinas”, 41; on the “atheism of the self”, see: Burggraeve, *Van zelfontplooiing naar verantwoordelijkheid*, 99.

*enters into thinking, but into a strictly phenomenologically conceived thinking. And that is ethics.*¹⁰⁸

In *Night*, Wiesel recounts the execution of a boy in the presence of all the concentration camp inmates.

*And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: 'For God's sake, where is God?' 'And from within me, I heard a voice answer: 'Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows...'*¹⁰⁹

Nowhere in Holocaust literature is God's suffering associated with the needy more deeply expressed than in this famous story by Wiesel. This utter divine kenosis does not mean a masochistic self-destruction of God but a profound identification with suffering humanity. If we do not take responsibility, then we kill God. The God on the gallows is the incarnation of the sacred seriousness of responsibility. Auschwitz reveals to us that we should not call on God when something goes wrong. God is not a hole-filler who plugs up our human deficits.

The Holocaust compels us to bring up God mainly through the *via negativa*. Yet God does not have to die on the gallows; humanity can save Him from it. Putting oneself at risk to save the Other from the gallows is to meet God and (thus) the deepest fulfilment of life (which is positive). In preparation for Christmas 1945, a number of women in Auschwitz had saved their bread for several days. On Christmas night they broke it and made ornate figures with it. They taught Christmas carols to the children and allowed them to enjoy the meager food. Here, in this concrete devotion to the concrete human being, the *adventus* of God into the world was celebrated. And only because this was possible in Auschwitz can God still be reborn in the world amongst people today.

Gizelle Hersh, a survivor, poignantly recounts how her mother screamed at her, "Gizelle, you are the oldest. Save the children!" when she and her three younger sisters were separated from their parents at

¹⁰⁸ "Der andere Gott dagegen (...) ist ein Protest gegen Auschwitz. Und dieser Gott erscheint im Antlitz des Anderen. In diesem Sinn fällt Gott ins Denken ein, aber in ein streng phänomenologisch verfaßtes Denken. Und das ist Ethik." Emmanuel Levinas, „Antlitz und erste Gewalt. Ein Gespräch über Phänomenologie und Ethik,“ *Spuren in Kunst und Gesellschaft* 20 (1987).

¹⁰⁹ Wiesel, *Night*, 65.

Auschwitz. From the last, dramatic words of her mother, Gizelle drew the courage to allow herself and her sisters to survive the horrors of the camp. In doing so, she brings up God in a specific way:

*God help us get out of this... And the sick, the deformed with their swollen feet, legs and stomachs. You do not believe we'll ever get out of here, do you? She obviously believed it. And because she believed in us and in God, I felt a glimmer of hope. I stopped crying.*¹¹⁰

In this light, Messianism takes on a new meaning in Levinas.¹¹¹ Messianism is normally based on the certainty that someone will come who will end and complete history. Now we know that history can go wrong. For example, in *The Gates of the Forest*,¹¹² Wiesel argues that the Messiah who did not come in Auschwitz will never come again. Levinas speaks of “*une religion sans promesse*”,¹¹³ a religion that promises nothing: if man fails in his responsibility, all history goes up in smoke. History does not necessarily have a happy ending.¹¹⁴

*Yes, but for me messianism is called into question by Auschwitz. I have to say this simply and personally. One just has to think differently about the meaning of salvation. Then I called devotion without promise. Love for God is love for the Torah. That means the recognition of goodness is more important than the love of God.*¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ “*God helpt ons hieruit te komen (...) En de zieken, de misvormden met hun opgezette voeten, benen en buiken. Je gelooft toch niet dat we hier ooit uitkomen? Zij geloofde het kennelijk wel. En omdat ze in ons geloofde en in God, voelde ik een sprankje hoop. Ik huilde niet meer.*” Gizelle Hersh, *Gizelle, Red de kinderen! Vier zusjes overleven Auschwitz* (Alphen aan den Rijn, the Netherlands: 1983), 68.

¹¹¹ Burggraave, *De bijbel geeft te denken: schepping, milieu, lijden, roeping, Gods passie en de ander, vergeving, bevrijding van de ethiek, in gesprek met Levinas*, 279-281; Martin Kavka, “Levinas’s Accounts of Messianism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford, United Kingdom: University Press, 2019); Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence*, 126-127.

¹¹² Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (New York, United States: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 225: “The Messiah whoa can come, but at Auschwitz did not come, has lost his meaning.”

¹¹³ Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, 130.

¹¹⁴ Levinas, „Emmanuel Levinas,“ 17.

¹¹⁵ „Ja, aber der Messianismus ist für mich durch Auschwitz in Frage gestellt. Das muß ich einfach und ganz persönlich sagen. Man muß den Sinn der Erlösung eben anders denken. Dan nannte ich die Devotion ohne Versprechen. Die

Messianism acquires a new ethical content in Levinas: “The Messiah, that is I”. To be I is to be Messiah.¹¹⁶ The Messiah is the righteous person who suffers and who takes on the suffering of the other.¹¹⁷

The personal responsibility that one person has towards another is such that even God cannot abolish it. Here we come to a final aspect of Levinas’ concept of God. Evil in his philosophy is not a mystical principle; it is the concrete insult that one human being inflicts on another. He points to the full autonomy of the offended person and to the full responsibility of the one who touches another human being. Sin cannot be erased by any rite because no one, not even God, can take the place of the victim. Here we touch on one of the most provocative consequences of the Holocaust: in Levinas’ philosophy, religion has become an (exclusively) ethical matter since Auschwitz. Human responsibility is such a serious matter that neither God’s omnipotence nor God’s mercy can relieve man (even post-factum) of his ‘task beyond his own skin’. “A world in which forgiveness becomes omnipotent becomes inhuman?”¹¹⁸

In his book, *The Sunflower*, Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal recounts how, during the Holocaust, he was called to the bedside of a dying German soldier who wanted to ask forgiveness from him, as a Jew, for the large number of Jewish murders for which he was responsible.¹¹⁹ Wiesenthal allowed the young German to die without forgiving him. His action can be understood in light of Levinas’ philosophy. Human responsibility has been so sacred since the Holocaust, so unconditional, that it cannot and should not be trivialized by forgiveness. This is the ultimate consequence of the Holocaust: God is an unconditional call to humanity, and he has no mercy on the human being who refuses to answer it.

In 1987 Levinas was interviewed regarding his attitude towards the Nazi criminal, Barbie. On the need to punish Barbie, he said:

*I would say to you that the man, Barbie, eventually disappears behind what he did and behind what he has been associated with. There is no possible sanction against him: there is no sanction for crimes above all human beings. As if there was human even in the crime!*¹²⁰

Liebe zu Gott ist die Liebe zur Thora. Das heißt, die Anerkennung der Güte ist wichtiger als die Liebe zu Gott.“ Levinas, “Antlitz und erste Gewalt,” 34.

¹¹⁶ Burggraave, *Van zelfontplooiing naar verantwoordelijkheid*, 72.

¹¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, 122.

¹¹⁸ Levinas, *Het menselijk gelaat*, 46.

¹¹⁹ Simon Wiesenthal, *De zonnebloem* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Elsevier, 1969).

¹²⁰ “Je vous dirais que l’homme Barbie disparaît finalement derrière ce qu’il a fait et derrière ce à quoi il a été associé. Il n’y a aucune sanction possible contre lui : on n’a pas de sanction pour les crimes au-dessus de tout humain.

This position can be understood in the integral framework of Levinas' thought: there are a number of cases in which our sense of what is humanly permissible is so thoroughly wounded that we are ethically incapable of granting forgiveness. A fundamental, irremediable scandalization of humanity does not allow for relativization, and, thus, the impossibility of forgiveness exists.

After the end of theodicy, what significance does Levinas believe (Jewish) religion finally has?¹²¹ Although God was silent in Auschwitz, Auschwitz paradoxically includes a revelation from God: an injunction to be faithful to *les cris d'Auschwitz qui retentiront jusqu'à la fin des temps* ('the cries of Auschwitz that will continue until the end of times'). To deny the God who was absent after Auschwitz (by failing to ensure the continuation of Judaism) would be tantamount to completing the murderous National Socialist endeavor. If God was absent from Auschwitz, evil was not. By abandoning the Jewish religion, one contributes to the diabolical completion of Hitler's 'final solution'. In this way, one neglects the ethical message of the Bible, of which Judaism is the bearer.

Especially on this point, the relation between Emmanuel Levinas and Emil Fackenheim is very clear.¹²² Despite the incomprehensible and unaccountable absence of God - or rather, precisely because of that silence - God commands us not to give in and not to give Hitler posthumous victories.¹²³ More than ever before, Judaism must remain the bearer of this ethical rejection of the diabolic.¹²⁴ Judaism will only be able to do this by appealing to the Messianic self 'in God's name' in history, inspired by the suffering of the other human being.¹²⁵

Despite the silence of God, it is impossible to do the opposite of what the Torah wants. After the silence, we cannot become thieves, liars, or murderers. We must love the Torah more than a certain, perhaps (still) imperfect, idea of God.¹²⁶

Finally, in the looming light of a universal Holocaust, this specific Jewish task acquires global significance. Will humankind, who committed

Comme s'il y avait de l'humain jusque dans le crime." Emmanuel Levinas, "Crime et inhumanité", *Les dossiers de globe* 1 (1987): 21.

¹²¹ Levinas, "La souffrance inutile," 337.

¹²² Levinas, "Le 614^o commandement," 55-57.

¹²³ For these thoughts, Levinas depends on Fackenheim. See mainly: Fackenheim, *La présence de Dieu dans l'histoire*.

¹²⁴ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 132: "It is impossible to remain silent. There is an obligation to speak. And if politics, arising everywhere, falsifies the original intentions of the discourse, there is an obligation to cry out in protest."

¹²⁵ Levinas, "Le 614^o commandement," 56.

¹²⁶ Levinas, "La mémoire d'un passé non révolu," 14.

so many atrocities in the 20th century and who, in all that terror, still sniffs the scent of the crematorium furnaces of the Final Solution, indifferently leave the world to suffering for the sake of suffering? Will it yield to the blind forces of a policy of fatality that imposes hardship on the weak and conquered? Will that humanity allow another Holocaust?

Emmanuel Levinas died on Christmas, December 25, 1995, but the challenges of his thought are very much alive. After Auschwitz, humanity has to continue Sacred History without theodicy. More than ever, the potential of the I in each of us will be called upon, inspired by the vulnerability of the Other. Here a number of new perspectives open up for faith in the twenty-first century. The Louvain Levinas specialist Roger Burggraeve says with Levinas that it is high time for ‘another God’.¹²⁷

We end with a quote from Etty Hillesum who, under constant threat of deportation, wrote the following quote in her diary. She summarizes, existentially, what we have put into words philosophically with Levinas.

*And if God does not help me further, then I will help God. Not with confidence that things will go well for me in the afterlife, but with confidence that, even when things go badly for me, I still accept and approve of this life. And this is the only thing that we can save in our time, and also the only thing that matters: a piece of You-in-ourselves, God, and perhaps we can also help to dig you up in the afflicted hearts of others. Yes, my God, You do not seem to be able to do too much about circumstances. They are just part of life. I am not calling you to account for them. You may call us to account for it later. And almost with every heartbeat it becomes clearer to me that You cannot help us, but that we have to help You.*¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Roger Burggraeve, *Hoog tijd voor een andere God* (Leuven: Belgium: Davidsfonds uitgeverij, 2015).

¹²⁸ “En als God mij niet verder helpt, dan zal ik God wel helpen. Niet een vertrouwen dat het mij in het uiterlijk leven wel goed zal gaan, maar een vertrouwen dat ik, ook wanneer het mij slecht gaat dit leven nog aanvaard en goedvind. En dit is het enige wat wij in onze tijd nog kunnen redden, en ook het enige waar het op aankomt: een stukje van Jou-in-onszelf, God en misschien kunnen wij er ook aan meewerken jou op te graven in de geteisterde harten van anderen. Ja, mijn God, aan de omstandigheden schijn Jij niet teveel te kunnen doen. Ze horen nu eenmaal bij het leven. Ik roep je er niet ter verantwoording voor. Jij mag er later ons ter verantwoording voor roepen. En haast bij iedere hartslag wordt het mij duidelijker, dat Jij ons niet kunt helpen, maar dat wij Jou moeten helpen.” Hadewych Snijdwind, “Christelijke volmacht tot

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