

A Pathological Goodness: Emmanuel Levinas' Post-Holocaust Ethics

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Abstract

This essay offers a detailed and comprehensive study of the ethical thought of post-Holocaust phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas, through the lens of human passions. Its purpose is to reveal the strengths, ambiguities and risks inherent in the practice of an ethos of infinite generosity, in the modern era.

In the words of Emil Fackenheim, the Holocaust is “the rupture that ruptures philosophy” (Fackenheim, E. 1982, 266). The philosopher, labouring in the shadow of that rupture, recognizes that in many respects philosophy stands at an impasse. The cumulative wisdom of the greatest minds of the past twenty-five hundred years, with all its attention to the Good and the Beautiful and the True, cannot account for the reality of the radical evil concealed deep within the human heart and exposed at Auschwitz. It is for this reason that Emmanuel Levinas does not merely address himself to an explanation of *this* horror (that many would argue has no reasons) but to a rethinking of philosophy itself. How is it that the wondrous philosophical truths, that have, for millennia, fascinated human minds and spawned our lofty ideals, have rarely found concrete manifestation in the daily encounters between human beings? How is it that the philosopher, physician of the soul, has, over these millennia, proven impotent in healing the misery, brutality and decadence that characterizes human

existence? How, in light of this failure, is the “love of wisdom” to be transformed into the “wisdom of love?” These questions underlie Emmanuel Levinas’ project of rethinking philosophy – ethics first.

Levinas approaches the rethinking of philosophy through a redefinition of the human subject. In this rethinking, the passions will play a central role at every stage in the healthy development of the responsible human being. The natural drives and emotions, for Levinas, provide the person with valuable guides to the Good, pointing the way to spiritual and moral fulfilment. A positive view of the passions, a rarity in ethical philosophy, composes not simply a bold innovation but a highly puzzling one, given the dark backdrop of the atrocities of the twentieth century against which Levinas is staging his work. Perhaps the greatest paradox concerning Emmanuel Levinas resides in his ability to maintain, in the wake of the Holocaust, such a sympathetic view of human existence that he can claim his utterly idealistic account to be a phenomenology rather than a religious sermon, a description rather than a prescription of human encounter (See Derrida, J. 1978, 79-153).

In his recasting of the drama of human subjectivity, Levinas affords the passions a fundamental role. From the “instant” the existent erupts from the field of Being-in-general, it is overwhelmed by feelings of *aporia*, helplessness, and dread. In an early

work entitled *Existence and existents*, Levinas explains that the immediacy of need and fear in the existent stems from its inability to understand its own being, the nature of its felt freedom, in relation to Being-in-general (Levinas, E. 1988, 1-7). Levinas' "instant", like Kierkegaard's "moment," is bereft of a history. A "polarization of *Being in general*," the instant thus provides the occasion for the genuinely new. The existent, thus seen, is to itself a result of the free act of its own creation, a self-fashioned project that is self-propelled into the world (Levinas, E. 1988, 18). But the essence of our humanity does not lie in our relationship with that world into which we have thrust ourselves; it is to be found in the relationship effected in the very act of our existence, a relationship, as Levinas puts it: "with the pure fact that there is Being, the nakedness of this bare fact" (Levinas, E. 1988, 19). This relationship is one of disquietude, restlessness, anxiety.

There is yet another aspect of this initial upsurge that requires our attention for the passions that it provokes, for the human existent is not merely the event of the genuinely new; he is at the same time the event of finitude. And that finitude is *felt* as need and fear, and results in a problematic state of clinging to that very being that is the source of simultaneous anxiety.

The belongingness to being is in fact not a rest in a harbour of peace; the dialectic of being and nothingness within essence is an anxiety over nothingness and a struggle for existence. (Levinas, E. 1991, 176).

From the instant of birth, the existent feels stalked by Death, that “absolute violence, murder in the night” (Levinas, E. 1969, 233). As a corporeal being, continuance is only ever secured an instant at a time, and thus remains a source of anxiety and a matter of constant vigilance. However, as we have seen, a clinging to being proves anything but a safe or comfortable refuge. On the contrary, it is experienced as “ontological claustrophobia” (Llewelyn, J. 1995, 11) for, Levinas tells us, “essence has no exits” (Levinas, E. 1991, 176); its formless content cannot be understood any more satisfactorily than death can be fathomed. The alternative to the struggle for survival reveals itself to be an eternal imprisonment in indeterminate content-free being where it is *felt* as the “*il y a*.” Here, timeless being takes on a gravity and a seriousness that make it unbearable, and that make its interruption seem imperative. The encounter with the *il y a* is always an affective encounter: an encounter felt viscerally as horror. The *il y a* is the horror of an inescapable fatality, an unavoidable eternity which one cannot flee. It is interesting to note that, for Levinas, the fear of eternal life is as original as the fear of Death, and both, at bottom, amount to a terror of the unknown, the unknowable. It is the horror in the face of the mysterious night of Being that Levinas substitutes for the wonder of intelligible, luminous Being that Plato places at the origin of philosophy.

Gathering the unknown into the “known” is the method by which the existent builds

interiority and thus security against the mysterious exterior realm of the “not-I.” Through cognitive processes, an existent hollows out an autonomous realm where alterity loses its sting. The gap between the unknown and the known is filled with the designation of meaning, the existent’s meaning. “Like a famished stomach that has no ears”, the knowing ego emerges and seizes control of the world. The ego’s knowledge of the other becomes a cancelling out of otherness, a reduction of the other to the self, and thus, for Levinas, a predatory act.

Driven by fear of the morrow, the ego gathers about itself all the necessities for survival: “ 'good soup', air, light, spectacles, work, sleep, etc.” (Levinas, E. 1969, 110); these things, extracted from the “elemental” in which man is steeped, gain new meaning as the “domicile.”

Man has overcome the elements only by surmounting... [immersion in the elemental] which confers upon him an extraterritoriality. He gets a foothold in the elemental by a side already appropriated: a field cultivated by me, the sea in which I fish and moor my boats, the forest in which I cut wood; and all these acts, all this labour, refer to the domicile. Man plunges into the elemental from the domicile. (Levinas, E. 1969, 131)

Human fears and needs are never eliminated, since death is only ever postponed but never overcome. The essential ambiguity of this very corporeality comprises the dilemma. But the naked and hungry body that permits the enslavement also allows

labour, so one can establish a safe refuge from the world at large and thus ensure endurance. The time of labour remains a time of need and fear, but it is also the occasion for meditation, the emergence of the psychic aspect of human existence. This emergence admits a certain limited freedom, as the existent recognizes needs to be purely material and thus admitting of satisfaction through one's own power (Levinas, E. 1969, 116). In the domicile, the ego becomes a "separated being"; he stands outside of the totality by establishing an inner life and an individual destiny that refuse integration into the historical order. This is the "heroic existence" of the isolated being that requires no other for contentment (Levinas, E. 1969, 307). The separated being is comfortable in solitary refuge, "naturally atheistic" and has no need for God. This stage is prior to the affirmation or denial of the existence of God; it is the separated self's mode of positing the self as unique and singular, by refusing to be just another nameless and insignificant face in the human crowd. The creature's unshakeable belief in self-sufficiency is, for Levinas, the mark of the greatness of the creator:

It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with himself. (Levinas, E. 1969, 58-59)

In the activity of filling needs, the separated being lives in a realm of self-satisfaction and isolated contentment, but also of enjoyment. The things that are extracted from

the elemental for use do not merely represent utility, but these are always a source of joy. Levinas posits the act of eating as the example *par excellence* of enjoyment, for here there is an exact conformity of object to intention. Though essentially an act of need, eating is not merely undertaken in order to ward off death, but eating constitutes the very act of living. In food, form and content are exactly adequate to each other; the path of pleasure goes out to the other, and returns to the self without remainder. The contents are *lived*; they feed life. The definitive subjective experience, eating describes a perfect “curvature of space” that is essential to the ego stage of the human subject.

To be sure, in the satisfaction of need the alienness of the world that finds me loses its alterity; in satiety the real I sank my teeth into is assimilated, the forces that were in the other become *my* forces, become me. (Levinas, E. 1969, 129)

Enjoyment is understood by Levinas as an ultimate relation with the substantial plenitude of being; eating is how one embraces within one's own being the substantiality of external things. In other words, it is the ultimate form of cognition.

Although Levinas is clear about the violent and predatory nature of the ontological adventure, not to mention the utter absurdity of the entire project of concern for myself, given that I am a being destined for destruction, he is also explicit about its absolute necessity in the evolution of the healthy human subject. Only through the

upsurge of the ego who needs, thinks, manipulates and utilizes he everyday world, enjoys and feels free, can the separation from the anonymous realm of the *il y a* be effected, and can the ego mature to the degree where it overcomes the fear that turns it inward, where it is able to welcome the call of the needy other.

In *Totality and Infinity*, this call from outside comes to the ego in the form of Desire:

Having recognized its needs as material needs, as capable of being satisfied, the *I* can henceforth turn to what it does not lack. It distinguishes the material from the spiritual, opens to Desire. (Levinas, E. 1969, 117)

For Levinas, need is a movement of interiority, a descent into oneself to build security and to establish an individual identity through the attaching of one's own truths to the world. But Desire is a relationship with "height": with utter exteriority and irreducible mystery. Desire is the movement outside oneself, an insatiable longing to escape one's singularity, to seek passionately a higher realm where truth becomes the property of the other. Despite the firm denial that *Eros* is lack, Platonic influence can be seen in Levinas' view of Desire. A sympathetic reading of the *Symposium* reveals strong parallels between that dialogue and *Totality and Infinity*. In both works, Desire mediates between the individual and the divine. In both, it is the ardent sensuous desire for the other that serves as the invitation to transcend one's constricted loyalties, an erotic summons to break through the narrow bounds of one's personal physical

existence, and to produce results that are, as far as is possible, boundless and infinite.

But since a relationship based on Levinasian Desire is not a matter of lack; it has, over Platonic *Eros*, the clear advantage of remaining perfectly disinterested. Levinas calls it a metaphysical movement of Goodness itself. Thus it pulls the subject up short in the midst of cognizing, and reveals the violence of ontology:

To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over things... the face in which the Other is produced submits my freedom to judgement. (Levinas, E. 1969, 303)

Putting my freedom into question has always been the task of a worthy ethics. The Greeks challenged freedom with truth, the Hebrews with justice. But Levinas insists that it be grounded at some deeper level that cannot be reduced to objective cognition. He tells us: "To identify the problem of foundation with the knowledge of knowledge is to forget the arbitrariness of freedom, which is precisely what has to be grounded" (Levinas, E. 1969, 85).

In *Totality and Infinity*, Desire arrests my totalizing efforts in the instant of the appearance of the face and is *felt* as the overwhelming longing to bestow the world I possess upon the needy stranger. The face of the other constitutes the call to another

dimension of being, the moral dimension. The face is the very “opening” through which the “invisible” cries out, and with Desire, a listening ear now tempers, nay eclipses, the devouring mouth. This call is heard, sensed, at a level much more subtle, more passive, than that of sensation, and it constitutes a shattering of the realm of identity, a rupture of its time and space. In *Totality and Infinity*, this rupture is represented as “a delightful lapse of the ontological” by which we are called to host the neighbour. But, in the darker mood of *Otherwise Than Being*, the potentially violent nature of the event is disclosed. In the latter work, Desire is conspicuous in its absence and, instead, I am depicted as summoned to the event of my execution; the “delightful lapse” becomes a “shock” whereby my persecutor takes me hostage against my will, burdens me beyond my capability, possesses me, obsesses me. It seems that, between the two works, it occurs to Levinas that the host, in actively welcoming the widow, the orphan and the alien, was not passive enough, still retained some of the free movement that would allow escape from the threatening stranger. In order truly to achieve infinity, Levinas will say, one must be prepared to give the infinite response, to sacrifice all that one is and has, to offer oneself as holy sacrifice to the most radical of evil. Indeed, Socrates would agree: But only when the situation is one in which one cannot avoid *suffering* wrong except by *doing* it (*Gorgias* 469 b-c).

In either case (host or hostage), however, the ego is not shed or abandoned as the desiring and compassionate moral being comes on the scene, nor does he unfold organically into something other than what he previously was. The ego continues across that rupture, with all its selfish needs and fears, all its predatory arts engaged. But the face is invulnerable to attack by the cognitive process; it is infinity itself, excess of being, full transcendence. Here the essential difference between need and desire is marked out. Need, grounded as it is in an economic self concerned exclusively with its own survival and happiness, implies violence; its principle rests on the distinct possibility that I may need to kill anyone who puts at risk my joyful existence. Desire, as Levinas describes it, alone forbids that murder:

Desire is unquenchable, not because it answers to an infinite hunger, but because it does not call for food. This desire without satisfaction hence takes cognizance of the alterity of the other. It situates it in the dimension of height and of the ideal, which it opens up in being. (Levinas, E. 1993, 56)

I can want to murder only the one who cowers below me, not the one who hovers above me. Or, we might say, I can exercise my power only over a being in the phenomenal world, not over the divine itself. As John Llewelyn puts it, that enigmatic other “escapes my power through resisting it not with force but by the first and original expression of the face commanding ‘Thou shalt not kill’” (Llewelyn, J. 1995, 102).

For Levinas, mere proximity is experienced as guilt and shame, as obsession and helplessness. Inescapable, shame proves to be the very instrument of glory. In *Totality and Infinity*, it transforms the sorrow of the other into my sorrow; In *Otherwise Than Being*, it transforms my suffering *for* the other into my suffering *from* the other. This shame is not a theoretical consideration in its turn, but a fundamental shame that freedom has of itself, as it discovers itself to be murderous and usurpatory. It is the way I discover what true freedom is all about. It teaches me that I possess only that which has been freely given to me, not that which I have taken as an outlaw. My shame lets me see the need in the other, by eclipsing my own needs and fears, casting me headlong into absurdity itself, an abyss of infinite responsibility, where the weight of the demand always exceeds my capability, where I am always committed before commitment, where guilt increases the more I respond, where, by *Otherwise Than Being*, I desire the undesirable (to be persecuted) in proportion to its undesirability.

Levinas paints a sombre picture of the moral assignment, as the joyful ego is crushed by the passions of shame, restlessness, obsession, and inadequacy. And Levinas is careful not to “sell us” on the benefits of the moral response, so as not to taint the pure gift by robbing it of its disinterestedness. However, certain benefits do reveal themselves in the course of the unfolding of this stage of the drama.

First of all, in my self-sacrifice for my neighbour, my death, that most terrifying of mysteries, receives a meaning. Death, for Levinas, is the ultimate mystery that opposes and threatens the ego. Because it is “foreign to all light”, death can never be grasped or understood. This poses a very real problem for the ego since death represents nothing short of a foreign and menacing power that invades the home realm but cannot be expelled. All attempts to overpower it through the knowing process are futile. Responding to Heidegger's definition of death as that which reveals to me my own individual authentic possibilities, Levinas shows death to be the ego's greatest threat, violently insinuating itself into the very solitude of the self-satisfied being and shattering the “safe house.” Levinas demonstrates the utter futility of the ego's concern for its life so long as Death has no meaning.

Nothing is more comical than the concern that a being destined to destruction takes for itself, as absurd as him who questions the stars, whose verdict is without appeal, in view of action. Nothing more comical, or nothing more tragic. [Only] the pre-original responsibility for the other is not measured by being, is not preceded by a decision, and death cannot reduce it to an absurdity (Levinas, E. 1993, 138).

Only in the ethical response, can the humble moral subject defuse death's sting. I force death to take on meaning. I give my death the meaning I choose in placing my own life at risk for the sake of extending the life of my neighbour, in choosing to remain governed by Goodness even unto death at the hands of my persecutor.

A further benefit of the moral response suggested by Levinas is my singularization. By virtue of my mere proximity, I become the chosen one, the saviour. I become unique and irreplaceable, the only one who, as host, can postpone my neighbour's death, the only one who, as hostage, can sacrifice my life for the Good.

Furthermore, for Levinas, I gain a truer freedom in the moral response. As I limit my finite freedom for the sake of prolonging the life of the other, another dimension of my freedom emerges. Levinas tells how the other actually sets free this fuller freedom. In imposing upon me the weighty burden of responsibility, the other whose life I save releases me from my *ennui*, that anonymous fatality of the *il y a* from which enjoyment and work could bring but temporary relief. It takes the other to release me from my ontological prison; it takes the other to found and justify my true freedom, to bring me out of the darkness of my solitary and secret existence, and lead me to sincerity.

Moreover, Levinas explains, the ethical response involves a "teaching." The falsity of the glory of the quest of my ontological adventure is suddenly exposed in all its predatory ugliness, and it is simultaneously revealed to me that true glory is *felt* as the weight of my shame. While still maintaining my complete immanence as ego, I am

cast into a connection with full transcendence, as pure glory opens up before me and ultimately reveals itself as the divine. For Levinas, as I humble myself before the other, I stand in “Society with God” that turns out to be not merely the absurdity of non-meaning, though it is this too, but an abundance of meaning about the nature of God's perfection. Levinas explains:

Society with God is not an addition to God nor a disappearance of the interval that separates God from the creature... [Instead, it is a revelation:] Multiplicity and the limitation of the creative Infinite are compatible with the perfection of the Infinite; they articulate the meaning of this perfection (Levinas, E. 1969, 104).

So Glory, for Levinas, is a *feeling*, a passion that connects me for a split instant with the divine, revealing a meaningfulness that is other than representation. I become the vehicle of the manifestation of god. “Glory could not become a phenomenon without entering into conjunction with the very subject to which it would appear, without closing itself up in finitude and immanence” (Levinas, E. 1991, 144).

For Levinas, it is precisely because the burden of responsibility is experienced as infinite, and because I feel my utter inadequacy to the task, that the divine can become manifest. The Infinite has glory only through subjectivity as it becomes a crucial term in the human adventure through my substitution. Glorification is “a peace sign to the other” (Levinas, E. 1991, 148). My “witness” proves to be the unique structure that

opens up an exception to the rule of being, revealing God.

Conclusion:

Thus the drama of the unfolding of human subjectivity appears to pull to a close with the emergence of the dimension of responsibility. However, this is not the case since responsibility shows itself to be infinite and thus, the more I respond to the call of the other, the more I am called, the more I am indebted, the more I feel the weight of that debt. Levinas insists that the drama of my humanity never closes as I am ever more guilty. What are we to make, then, of Levinas' picture of human existence, draped as it is in hues of deep emotion? The passions that underlie each stage of subjectivity clearly designate one's outlook on the world. It is only natural that we feel fear and need as finite beings trapped between Death and the *il y a*. It is only natural that we seek to secure a safe stronghold against the unknown that threatens our very survival and happiness. Though they may lead to predatory acts and evil consequences, human passions, natural drives and instincts are not evil in themselves.

For Levinas, human beings are essentially good. Just as the innocent child groping toward maturity leaves a little spilt milk in the path, so the ego is a "natural man" just surviving as best he can. In good Socratic fashion, he does not even knowingly do harm to others; he merely overlooks them. He is, in Levinas' words: "innocently

egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not ‘as for me...’ — but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate — without ears” (Levinas, E., 1969, 124).

Furthermore, the ego's evolution into a moral being is entirely outside of freedom or autonomous control. The call to fuller being must come from the other. If I fail to hear that call, it is thus the other's fault, and not my own. The ego can never be counted guilty. In the Levinasian world, the devouring ego remains blameless while, paradoxically, the responding moral subject is the condemned, sentenced to greater and greater depths of self-sacrifice, and ever increasing feelings of shame and inadequacy.

What is ostensibly problematic in this theory of subjectivity is the denial of conscious choice as an essential aspect of human action. Of course, in a way, the humble response of the *me voici* finds precedent in Socratic humility that claims to know nothing and to know that it knows nothing, in order to preserve the soul's openness for learning. In the case of the moral subject, we can readily see the need to insist that response remain prior to choice; this clearly maintains the subject's disinterestedness, by refusing all opportunity for calculation of advantage or disadvantage prior to response that would by necessity taint the pure gift.

Furthermore, Levinas sees the concern for grounding action in a *knowledge* of the Good as a profound flaw in Western tradition born of a predominant tendency to “subordinate unworthiness to failure, [and] moral generosity itself to the necessities of objective thought” (Levinas, E. 1969, 83). Levinas is telling us that our very humanity means having many centres from which we approach truth. As we witnessed in Alkibiades' speech at the end of Plato's *Symposium*, a unique learning can take place in the community of love that cannot be known through rational inquiry. A crucial aspect of Alkibiades' learning, that gave access to very private secrets about Socrates, was a naked vulnerability and a deep-rooted sense of shame. When our mode of communication is other-oriented, there is a greater openness to our own fragility and inadequacy, a humble readiness to listen and learn. Then our response has a greater chance of being a good one, even without the “guarantees” of knowledge. Perhaps, like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Freud, Levinas is suggesting that the choice made in oblivion gives a fuller account of our decisions. Levinas raises many provocative questions regarding the adequacy and violence of a knowledge-based ethics, not to be easily glossed over. But, in the end, are we not obliged to agree with Martha Nussbaum that what does not reach out to order the world does not truly love (Nussbaum, M. 2001, 199)? Do we really want to repeat in our own lives the tragic-comic love of an Alkibiades ... comic for its Dionysian display of wanton frolic and

happy abandonment, tragic not merely because of its unrequitedness, the anger, pain and frustration consistent with the disordered life, but because we, as audience enjoying the God's eye view, can see ahead to the tragic results of Alkibiades' recklessness (disgrace, exile, murder)? Alkibiades' tragic end reveals to us the self-cancelling character of an unordered love. Levinas' call to service beyond the structure of reason inherent in any concept of duty is nothing short of a call to martyrdom. Reason may not have *exclusive* access to the Good-Beyond-Being, but reason is needed to access the truths of *this* world. In the real world, reason will inform the heart of the hungry man, who has but a crust of bread, to give *only half* to the hungry stranger.

And what about Levinas' self-serving ego? How is he to be held accountable for the selfishness and violence? Where decisions are depicted as wholly natural acts of instinct, justified in themselves as *conatus esse*, the violence of the ego's reckless exercise of its "freedom" and autonomy, while acknowledged by Levinas, is yet trivialized as a mere failure to notice the other's pain. Again, we saw such optimism in the Socratic claim that no one *knowingly* harms others. We might object that our everyday experiences reveal many a self-serving individual clearly making a *conscious* choice to sacrifice others for the sake of expedience or personal profit. Yet, with Levinas, the persecutor is exonerated of every rapacious and predatory choice by

the fact that those choices are not morally educated choices. Decisions that victimize others are a function of reason alone, prior to any input from the heart. With Levinas, this is enough for acquittal; the perpetrator remains innocent of the crimes.

In fact, the worse the victimizer's choices, the more innocent. Levinas holds it as unfair to consider persons as the sum of their actions. He explains: "To measure a man by his works is to enter his interiority as though by burglary... Works signify their author but indirectly, in the third person" (Levinas, E. 1969, 66-67).

In Levinas' opinion, to view another's acts dispassionately *from the outside* is to remove them from their authentic contextuality, their "primordial sphere." But if the "truly moral" lies beyond reason, discursive language, and community view, what is to found a system of justice? How are we to decide on appropriate conduct for all men? This view of unlimited sympathy for the uniqueness of the individual undercuts the very basis upon which moral disputes can hope to reach settlement. We can only argue whether our actions conform to a law, all the while knowing all laws to be removed from the moral order.

This is an amazing stance for the philosopher labouring in the shadow of the Holocaust. Does it not give license to the diabolical and dismiss it as innocent self-

preservation? The Auschwitz guard is even a necessary instrument of God's glory, indeed a blessing in disguise, because he becomes the occasion for us to become full moral subjects. That is to say, if it takes the other to free me from my ontological prison, it takes the Nazi guard to call forth my *infinite* response and bring me all the way to glory and to God. Thus radical evil is calmly excused as mere unreadiness to relate to exteriority.

Moreover, while absolving the evil person, is Levinas not also trivializing the sacrifice of the good person, insisting that the moral response, always prior to thought, is never knowingly undertaken? These are serious questions with profound implications in a world where radical evil continually masquerades as the civilized and the cultured. Is Levinas upholding the duty of the post-Holocaust philosopher if he dismisses the diabolical thus? Is Levinas “dozing off” in the midst of his “night watch?”

There may be another way to understand the apparent paradox of Levinas' sympathetic view of the amoral choice. As an explanation for radical evil, the theory of the innocent ego certainly appears lacking. If intended as inspiration to turn the evil person in the direction of moral growth and worship of the Good, the restless obsession and unbearable weight of shame and inadequacy are hardly effective selling

points of the moral realm. But perhaps Levinas is not addressing himself to the amoral person at all. After all, he asks, paraphrasing Plato's question of the *Republic*: "Would you be able to convince people who do not want to hear? (Levinas, E. 1993, 18)"

Perhaps Levinas is not so much concerned with reaching the unreachable or explaining why the evil person does what he does, as with giving the good person a reason to go on serving the good. In a world so full of evil that self-sacrifice can be seen as utter foolishness and senseless martyrdom, where the degree of one's unscrupulousness all too often parallels the degree of one's "success", good action, in fact any action, runs the risk of a loss of all meaning and justification.

Levinas reveals how human meanings are emptied out by events of radical human brutality. He says:

The unburied dead in wars and extermination camps make one believe the idea of a death without a morning after and render tragic-comic the concern for oneself and illusory the pretension of the rational animal to have a privileged place in the cosmos (Levinas, E. 1993, 127)

Levinas understands that even the person of strong conscience who desires to do the good can easily become trapped in fear and hopelessness, or worse, become driven to desperate and violent measures to protect oneself and one's loved ones. Levinas sees the dangers of an uncontrolled individual freedom, but he also sees the difficulty

(impossibility?) of limiting that freedom... that anarchy... without ourselves becoming totalitarian. With this radically new way of defining human subjectivity, Levinas may be offering us the occasion to move beyond the paralysis of *ressentiment* of the atrocious, and a divine “reason” to go on serving the Good, simply because we are blessed with a conscience, simply because we recognize the good when we *feel* it, simply because we recognize ourselves as the *chosen ones*, *called* to do good, whether it makes sense to do so or not. In fact, it is the utter absurdity of my quest for the Good Beyond Being that determines its utter necessity to my moral, and *human*, fulfilment.

Perhaps there is another subtle message in the infinite guilt Levinas assigns to the moral subject. Levinas may be issuing a warning to morally self-satisfied Westerners in the light of the vast masses of third world victims whose wretchedness supports Western over-abundance. He may be alerting us to the possibility that, though we enjoy a prosperity much greater than the rest of the world, we ought not take our full bellies and fine possessions as signals of moral virtue. We may live better than the wretched of the earth because we are “guilty” of failing to acknowledge the rights of other human populations to share in the commonwealth of the earth’s riches. Levinas may be positing that to be fully human means to be “guiltily” responsible for others less fortunate than we, our human fellows. He repeatedly quotes with approval,

throughout his interviews with Philippe Nemo (1981), as elsewhere in his corpus, the words of Dostoevsky from *The Brothers Karamazov*:

We are all guilty of all, and for all men, before all, and I more than all the others (Dostoevsky, F. 1957, 264).

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