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## In the presence of suffering: toward a new understanding of evil

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# In the Presence of Suffering: Toward a New Understanding of Evil

A Dissertation

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

June, 2018

BY

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## Abstract:

The present dissertation addresses the question of evil and suffering as intrinsically intertwined, linked by the notion of affective temporality, as distinct from ‘clock time.’ Following Adi Ophir, I define evil as superfluity, as *what ought not to be*, thus divorcing it from any idea of necessity, and its social production that must be reduced or disrupted. The catastrophes that are still happening take precedence over past ones, since the former are still open to reduction, intervention, and alleviation. Here time becomes a key notion that alerts us to the possibilities of responding morally to present disasters. Time reappears again at the heart of suffering, understood as “the duration of the encounter with the unbearable.” I argue that affective time activates and conceptually revitalizes our moral agency, since it is phenomenologically described as open to interruption. Thus, we have the choice to either let the agonizing duration of another’s suffering go on uninterrupted or fragment this temporality, thereby offering the sufferer a relief and a glimpse of a more ‘habitable’ temporality, the temporality of going about your business in the world and forgetting the ticking of the clock. Thus, we are capable of altering the suffering other’s sense of time. In my discussion of Spinoza, Ophir, Amery, and Levinas, I situate suffering as the very voice and *language* of superfluous evil and argue that understanding affective temporality in its relation to evil opens up new possibilities of its concrete, situated alleviation. If evil *qua* suffering is a language that can be studied and understood, our moral indifference becomes increasingly less justifiable. Ultimately, I submit that failing to exercise our agency in the face of the concrete suffering of others means allowing their torment to continue uninterrupted, thus forming the juxtaposition of moral action and complicity.

The measure of love is love without measure.

—Saint Augustine

if I do not love you I shall not love

—Samuel Beckett

For my mother, Ludmila, who is the true heroic presence behind all my dreams, all my accomplishments, and all my aspirations. She is the warm, tender radiance illuminating my forever disabled body and recalcitrant spirit, transforming my socially expected humility of a cripple into the courage of a tiny warrior, whose claws are as sharp as God's. I would not welcome the person I would have become without her in my life. For my significant other and all my intellectually vibrant friends and colleagues who stood beside me during my hour of greatest need and who continue making this world a more hospitable place for me.

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I want to thank Dr. Steeves, Dr. Thompson, Dr. Birmingham, and Dr. Perkins, who is sadly no longer at DePaul University, as well as other faculty members, for their continued support and unwavering faith in the life of my mind, in my passion for understanding, and in the force of my ideas.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Dr. Kevin Thompson.

I am equally grateful to my ever-supportive family, my partner, and all my friends for their priceless gift of innumerable philosophical discussions, suggestions, and insights, as well as their intellectual and ethical generosity. There have been times when I lost confidence in the value of my work completely and I would not have regained it if my friends and colleagues had not believed in me.

Lastly, the content of this work is greatly influenced by the life and death of my late fiancé Aaron Huth. It is no exaggeration to say that my dissertation was created out of his lucid blue eyes and of his delicate ashes.

I'm a hero, you see. It's easy to be a hero. If you don't have hands or feet, you're either a hero or you're dead.

—Ruben Gallego

I wanted you to see what real courage is.... It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do.

—Harper Lee

Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.

—Frantz Fanon

We do not understand, we are hungry and we are hungry.

—Clarice Lispector

## Introduction

### A Girl Remembers

What guides moral knowledge (or practical reason, *phronesis*) is the interest in superfluous evils that befall particular and concrete others or threaten them.

—Adi Ophir

If there is something dangerous about me, there is also something pure.

—Clarice Lispector

While I shall speak of evil and severe physical disability in a moment, let us start elsewhere. In her early student paper, Simone Weil wrote on Jacob Grimm’s tale “The Six Swans.” The tale tells the story of six brothers transformed into swans by their malicious stepmother. To help them return to human form, their sister spent six years sewing six shirts of white anemones.<sup>1</sup> She was to keep completely silent until she was done with her task. This is how Weil commented on the story: “acting is never difficult.... we always do too much and waste ourselves in disorderly actions.... It is almost impossible to sew anemones together and turn them into a shirt, and the difficulty is such that it prevents any additional action that would alter the purity of that six-year silence.” Thus, a strange, arduous, nearly impossible task, which I would liken to the tremendous difficulty of sustaining an ethical orientation throughout one’s lifetime, an

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<sup>1</sup> According to the original tale, the shirts are to be made out of stinging nettles, making the process of sewing incredibly painful. To transpose this story onto this inquiry, it is clear that while experiencing a moral desire is more or less effortless, the labor required to sustain moral comportment toward others and the endeavors to alleviate suffering as it surges has a painful intensity to it. Your revolt in the face of injustice is more powerful than even the bleeding fingers.



orientation toward singular others in distress in all of their maddeningly messy particularity.<sup>2</sup>

I hope that the present inquiry will minimize the aura of near-impossibility surrounding moral endeavors, presenting the task of morality in the most practical, concrete terms, while preserving the pure, almost ascetic core of these endeavors and an uncannily steadfast, seemingly groundless commitment to the well-being of others that a moral subject<sup>3</sup> cultivates. The slightly surreal nature of Weil's retelling of the story speaks to the idea that while exemplary actions do take place on a somewhat regular basis, morality's heart is strange, sublimely stubborn, shot through and through with radiant lucidity, and pulsating at the center of every disaster, if only as a possibility. My inquiry situates morality between the practical means of alleviating an other's suffering and shirts of white anemones.

This work is written with the sole purpose of reducing concrete evils in the world, with unexpected theoretical twists and turns resulting in the process of investigation, culminating in the findings that I, the author, admit not to have even anticipated. It is not concerned with understanding evil for its own sake, but understanding it only with a view

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle encapsulates the extreme difficulty of creating principles out of particular situations when he states, "it is always necessary for those who are acting to look at the circumstances surrounding the occasion themselves, just as is the case also with the medical art or the art of steering a ship."<sup>2</sup> We cannot predict what we'll be confronted with next, just like it is futile to try and predict or systematize the thrashing of the sea waves in a storm. Which is to say that the correct course of action arises from out of a particular situation itself, not from out of any principle floating above reality. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Joe Sachs (Newbury, MA: Focus, 2002), 1104a.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that while I occasionally parts ways with Ophir, utilizing his insights and concepts in a somewhat different way, I believe at least part of this divergence is due to the fact that Ophir seems to be essentially a humanitarian interventionist, which means that his moral subject is often the government or other organizations capable of intervention. The moral subject that I speak of and try to articulate is a person, any person. Maybe *you*. Maybe *me*.

to minimizing it. A constellation of concepts, an arrangement of figures under discussion, departures from the professional ideal of hollow exegesis, and a relation between different socio-political and ethical categories that you will find here are aligned according to practical and moral ways of responding to evil and suffering.

While I have been engaging with Adi Ophir's groundbreaking work *The Order of Evils* for many years, in my continued efforts to come to terms with the questions of evil,<sup>4</sup> the temporality of trauma, and suffering, my more recent experience of deep grief and loss made my search for understanding both even more personal and urgent. What follows is the product of my theoretical investigations and personal encounter with the senselessness of ongoing suffering, the encounter that convinced me that Ophir is correct in identifying it as a type of evil. I will go on to argue that we cannot study one without studying the other. More generally, I situate my work within the coordinates given to us by Ophir, Jean Amery's harrowing account of the internal reality of the victim, with an attention to, and reinterpretation of, Emmanuel Levinas's coupling of otherness and ethics.<sup>5</sup>

First, I want to echo Oksala's claim that "radical reflection on one's own experience must be an essential element of feminist theory"<sup>6</sup> by stating that radical

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the problematic use of the term 'evil' in the political realm, see the introduction to Valerie Hartouni, *Visualizing Atrocity: Arendt, Evil, and the Optics of Thoughtlessness* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). I define evil as the name of the experience of recoil, when we feel, viscerally and crushingly, that *this ought not to be*.

<sup>5</sup> While Ophir makes a clear distinction between the terms 'morality' and 'ethics,' I chose to use these interchangeably. To be more precise, I define morality or ethics as the subject's movement toward another whose aim is the reduction of this particular suffering.

<sup>6</sup> Johanna Oksala, "In Defense of Experience" in *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 399.

reflection on one's own experiences is inherently important to moral theory as well. As Scott, whose influential essay occasioned a dialogue with Oksala, puts it, "experience... becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, "experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted."<sup>8</sup> According to Scott, experience is a discursive event, it wants to be known, heard, understood, just like I attempt to give my experiences a voice in creating this work.

As a woman with a severe physical disability, with her function amounting only to typing, in chronic pain, I have spent most of my life thus far attempting to understand why both the government and various charity institutions *and* individuals have been so thorough in their neglect of my basic needs. Is it not clear enough that I am in need of urgent relief somehow. I could not understand and I still cannot why condemning the disabled to such deep social abandonment, in an era of alleged inclusion, tolerance, and political correctness, has not been seen as an evil or even a legitimate cause for protest. Later, I will learn from Ophir disallowing an expression of evil, i.e., preventing it from being expressed and visible, which applied to my situation rather well. The evil done to the disabled is an evil still without an expression. When I fell violently ill as a small child, my life expectancy was about five years. I am thirty-five years old now, on the verge of getting my doctoral degree, and I am unanimously described as fierce and strong, though no one asks what happens to my strength when I am completely alone.

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<sup>7</sup> Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), pp. 773-797.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 797.

(Adi Ophir wrote to me, generously and kindly, “what must credited is your courage, your insistence to go through all this unimaginable suffering, and keep thinking, and keep writing, against all odds, and make your suffering an object of philosophical reflection.”)<sup>9</sup> But I did not have to fight alone, only with my family by my beside, for the semblance of a life worth living. No one does.

While this work is not directly about disability, I admit that in defending the moral value of a singular weaker one, I see “the lone girl in the power chair, failing to part the sea of human beings in a crowded hallway, comes to a halt, displaying infinite patience with the people in front of her, but she has little chance of being recognized as a person, of being addressed as a human being by those around her.”<sup>10</sup> That is, if you are lucky enough to live in a place whose streets and curb cuts are make it possible to *use* a power chair. I see brittle bones, weak, half-atrophied limbs, and weirdly curved spines. I see the one almost always perpetually deprived of social visibility, human interaction, and inclusion. As will become glaringly clear throughout this work, ‘the recipient’ of the ethics I am investigating here is a single suffering individual, the forgotten one, the morally valueless one, in the din of the discussions of “untold millions... [who] suffer the crushing fate of being no use to the world economy.”<sup>11</sup> My allegiance does not lie with the millions. While I acknowledge the suffering of “untold millions” as a highly serious, socio-political concern, possibly *the* concern, I reject the possibility of any practical ethics of millions.

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<sup>9</sup> Ophir, personal correspondence, 09/08/2017.

<sup>10</sup> Tobin Anthony Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), pp. 160-61.

<sup>11</sup> Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 12.

To return to Oksala for a moment, experience also offers the building blocks of solidarity among the victimized, the marginalized, and the oppressed,<sup>12</sup> which means, translating these defenses of experience vis-à-vis theory as such into the purely moral register, that I hope to speak, both humbly and passionately, for those victims whose voices are silent, who have no modicum of academic visibility the way I do, who are too crushed to take up a pen and write about their plight. Even though I write from the vantage point of the severely disabled, I believe that my theoretical journey toward practical ethics, an ethics that does not shy away from an overlooked other in distress, will be of value to everyone with the slivers of the irremediable inside them.

In other words, here I am attempting to straddle and operate on the fine line between theoretical rigor and the experience of raw suffering, between speaking *as* and *on behalf of*. It is my conviction that the form of expression of the work itself must convey the urgency of the problem. The writing that you will find here will be laden with multiple intensities, ranging from sorrow to the slowly coiling anger of those who have been silent for too long, it will express an unmistakable rhythm, rising to a crescendo and falling to a whisper, it will make home in the element of the poetic, it will swell with mourning and the violent impatience in the face of the existing state of affairs.

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<sup>12</sup> Referring to *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* by Sonia Kruks, Oksala writes, “Kruks wants to ground female experience in the female body, and she urges us to acknowledge the significance that nonlinguistic, embodied experiences such as pain must have in feminist theory. She draws on her own experience of working as a volunteer at a battered women’s shelter and argues that embodied experience forms an affective basis for solidarity among women: there is a *direct* experience of affinity among women that is possible because I can recognize as mine the embodied experiences of another woman, even while knowing that she and I are in other ways very different.” Ibid., 391. See also Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 166-67.

I will speak of water lilies and swords, of eternity and ashes, of lambs and lions, of celestial doors and terror, of stinging nettles and swans, of jewels and vultures, of Beckett's fragile dead bees and fatality, of clay and delirium, of winged horses and hungry eyes.

You will see why.

According to Dana Villa,

as the twentieth century draws to a close, it is difficult to avoid being overwhelmed by moral nausea. There are the well-known numbers: ten million dead in the First World War, a war fought over virtually nothing; roughly forty million in the Second World War, including the six million Jews killed in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps; twenty million or more in the Soviet gulag; thirty million dead as the result of the debacle of Mao's "Great Leap Forward"; plus the millions from a host of less spectacular but no less horrific massacres. Any conception of human dignity that hinges upon the presumption of the moral progress of the species has been shattered by these events.<sup>13</sup>

Which is to say, evil and the indifference to it are the guiding issues in the past and current centuries. In writing this work, I admit, however, that it is not moral nausea that overwhelms me. It is fury and grief.

Let me begin my inquiry ethics by submitting that there is no moral summon or law that strikes us from up above, dictating a certain type of behavior to us,<sup>14</sup> if only because the responses to suffering that could be called moral are too varied for them to be determined by any kind of law and because most people who have been called to respond to an instance of evil would confirm that encountering someone's pain and addressing it has very little to do with rules and laws. According to Bergson, "we should find it very

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<sup>13</sup> Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> In "On the Principles of Pure Practical Reason," Kant appeals to what he calls there the "sole fact of pure reason," which is consciousness of the fundamental law of pure practical reason, i.e., the supreme moral law. See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 45.

difficult to discover examples of such [a moral] imperative in everyday life.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, we have good reason to doubt the existence of the absolute other that commands moral dignity and respect *because* it is the absolute other, as if moral responses and an encounter with a kind of oversaturated otherness or uniqueness were cleanly aligned and if the circularity of the argument that the absolute other is synonymous with dignity *qua* the absolute other were not glaring enough. As I show further in the present work, we cannot appeal to universal bodily vulnerability either, i.e., the predicament of all human bodies wherein we are all subject to eventual decline and death, which is supposed to instigate or activate the thinking of empathetic relationality, for the reasons I will explain later.<sup>16</sup> What else can we then appeal to if we ever hope to amplify and render more consistent the moral actions of specific individuals that do take place on a regular basis, even if these actions remain barely visible under the grid of globalized ideals of ending suffering for the greatest number of people, such that helping one specific other is not even recognized as a matter of importance? Indeed, given the current moral axiology, we must suspend the vantage point from which alleviating specific suffering appears meaningless, if we are to respond to a particular other in distress.

I believe that people experience the desire to alleviate someone else’s suffering every day, as a matter of fact, as long as they experiences themselves as the addressees of the cry for help, which means positing as one of my starting points a kind of moral potential. In Bauman’s words, “ moral behavior is conceivable in the context of

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<sup>15</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 15.

<sup>16</sup> See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016) and Erinn Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016).

coexistence, of being with others, that is, a social context.”<sup>17</sup> I further submit that the moral desire has a teleology built into it, such that the goal is the cessation or at least the reduction of suffering. (The point is to demonstrate *how*.) As Ophir eloquently puts it, “the passage from the amoral domain of evils, as facts about the occurrence of damage and suffering, to the moral domain, in which evils appear as wrongs and injustices, does not take a leap of faith over an unbridgeable gap. No Rubicon is crossed in the passage from an *is* to an *ought*.” Indeed, this is “not an extraordinary capacity.”<sup>18</sup> Moral actions do not have an exceptionally rare, unusual provenance. Rather, moral actions are to make a transition from the occasional to the common, rather than from the particular to the universal. In short, to cite Vetlesen, what is at stake is “a conscious reluctance to subscribe to the effacement of the human important of the suffering.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet, the world seems to be drowning in distress and indifference all the same, with one’s suffering usually confined to the private sphere, best left to family and friends, and with scant, severely underfunded social mechanisms of support (hospitals, shelters, humanitarian asylums, and so on) being either inaccessible to many sufferers or providing grotesquely inadequate relief.<sup>20</sup> The sufferer and the addressee no longer

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<sup>17</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), 179.

<sup>18</sup> Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 342.

<sup>19</sup> Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 246.

<sup>20</sup> It can be further argued that the current moral standard of anonymous charity (e.g., we donate money not to a cancer patient we know, possibly a neighbor or an acquaintance, but to a cancer research organization) is a thorough erasure of personal judgment, where a specific individual has to exercise their judgment as to whom to help and how. We are encouraged to leave such moral decisions either to charity organizations or the state itself, further weakening our sense of agency. Furthermore, institutionalized charity reduces morality to a set of transactions, taking its living, pulsating unpredictably and singularly human heart out of it.



intersect on an equal surface. Just think of the instances when you ask for even minimal relief and you get a web link to a charity organization in return, which both has the value and the function of relieving the potential addressee of their judgment and responsibility, i.e., “sticking to a come-what may stance of abstaining from abstaining from deciding what or who, is right and what is wrong.”<sup>21</sup> It is thus the failure to *act* morally and efficiently that becomes the real problem here, not the absence of moral desire. What arrests this moral desire then?

Even though an obvious answer would have to do with the primacy of self-interest, positing the existence of moral desire already implies a suspension of self-interest, however temporary and fickle. Rather, I suggest a threefold answer. First, what I take to be problematic is the idea of the equivalence of victims or that all victims suffer the same, which indicates a confusion of what *is* with what *could be*, an equation of, or at least moral proximity between, the inevitable decline we are all facing with more unexpected, contingent suffering, commonly referred to as ‘twists of fate,’ in addition to a peculiar tendency to de-emphasize the role of the obviously *unequal* circumstances surrounding the victims when it comes to addressing their suffering. The universally human capacity to suffer and the unequal distribution of the means of remediation and the modes of recognition have to be clearly demarcated and understood in their implications.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, 246.

<sup>22</sup> My emphasis on assessing the socio-political situation of a suffering other does not signal a return of numerical ethics. Rather, I will be arguing that the judgment of who is facing the greatest abandonment is something we owe to the sufferer, as I will elucidate in detail in chapter 3, which means that the provenance of this call to judgment is the victim’s internal reality.

This is problematic for several reasons, but one that is pertinent here is that once suffering becomes undifferentiated, almost impersonal, and overwhelming, we are paralyzed with inaction. When the cries for help become one deafening din, we can no longer discern the others we *can* help with those we *cannot*.<sup>23</sup> To assess one's capacity for a moral response is to take into account the addressee's positionality, i.e., their proximity to a scene of suffering, their health condition, financial resources, the amount of contacts they can activate and marshal to amplify the response, etc. Thus, undifferentiated, globally understood suffering disallows for a sense of agency. Morality, we might say, breaks down with the stranger, since it misses the relationality that lies at the center of moral endeavors.<sup>24</sup>

As Ricoeur puts it, "every actions has its agents and its patients."<sup>25</sup> What I thus hope to accomplish here is to articulate a recipient of a moral action such that it is commensurate with a moral agent, stripped of infinite(ly) impossible demands and radical asymmetry between the two. To place a single suffering other at the center of moral inquiry entails that the addressee must be of an 'equal standing,' someone capable of

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<sup>23</sup> "[T]he amazing improvement in access to means of communication, which can reach suffering almost anywhere and at any time and broadcast it all the time, is disproportional to the means of intervention of governments and other public bodies that could, in principle, intervene. The gap between the accessibility to suffering that various producers of images and representations have and the accessibility of the average viewer, who finds himself staring at the TV screen faced with a deluge of images of suffering, is larger still. No wonder, therefore, that this viewer tends to withdraw from the addressee position, stops hearing the cries for help, watches suffering as a spectacle. When the representation of suffering includes a representation of the distance and the accessibility of the sufferer, when this distance is very large and the accessibility is very low, the witness can acknowledge the suffering without occupying the position of the addressee of the utterance.... When footage of bombed cities, hunger-stricken villages, plagued refugee camps is shown, I am not invited to offer help." Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 301.

<sup>24</sup> I thank my friend Danielle Meijer for helping me refine this point, as well as for her other truly insightful suggestions.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 157.

judgment, moral understanding, and differentiation. However, the ideal of tolerance is routinely internalized as if the individual, in their attempt to be fair and just, were obligated to see *himself* “as a society, as if he should renounce his own agency.... Declining to make judgments or discriminations on the ground established on the ground of tolerance... What tolerance and pluralism teach is how *not* to choose...”<sup>26</sup> Thus, part of the problem is the blurring of the individual and the social, where the former tries to absorb ‘the ideal moral values’ to the detriment of their ability to genuinely help someone.

The second problem here, as I have come to gradually realize, is that the relationship between time and suffering, as it applies to morality, has not been sufficiently understood. Indeed, ethics is often atemporal, timeless, hovering above both the clocks and the experience of change, due to our continued desire to force it under the form of the eternal law, where time and universality are if not mortal enemies, but at least complete strangers to each other. I want to bring ethics and time together, but not in the semi-mystical way where we dip in the forever-obscure inkwell of mortality and learn to treasure each other because we are finite and the ones we love are subject to ultimate disappearance. We do not require the final threat of mortality to be interested in the well-being of others.<sup>27</sup> When Levinas tells us that suffering is the impossibility of nothingness

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<sup>26</sup> Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 237.

<sup>27</sup> I admit that few theoretical arguments and constructs upset me as much as an ethics of mortality, where the latter occasions an insight into our universal finitude and a comportment of care, stemming from the recognition of the dust-like fragility of our uniqueness. Having lost my fiancé and having almost my mother in a car accident, I know with a sword-like cutting certainty that I do not need people to suffer and die for me to love them or to experience their irreducible singularity. To give you an example, in the memoir following the death of her husband, Jamison speaks of seeing mummified

or when Ophir defines it as the duration of the encounter with the unbearable, just like Amery's haunting meditations on moral time, we begin to see that ethics begins with an encounter with one's torment and that suffering is the experience of pure duration, but what are the implications of this insight? If understanding suffering is inseparable from the constellation of socio-political, highly specific factors around it, how does this affect our understanding of time?

Third, I believe that the ease with which people pass by a suffering other is accounted by the confusion regarding the 'object' of ethics. To be sure, it is a human being in distress, but is it *this* human being, in front of us, or some distant others, the one you have not met yet? It seems that in neglecting a single person, we engage in some kind of futural fantasy, where we do more and help more (anonymous) people. As I will argue throughout this work, the thinking according to which helping one person is not a big deal, not really and morally anyway, since there is always an almost-hallucinated possibility of minimizing the suffering of more people in the future is deeply and near-irremediably ingrained in our moral imaginary. The notion of the moral imaginary stands for the repository of sedimented ideas, half-truths, cognitive habits, convictions without questioning, not to mention beliefs and values of long-forgotten provenance. In short, the

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owls at the Natural History Museum. She writes, "it seemed a violation of wild things to see such creatures stuffed and fakely perched. Yet had they not been dead and fixed, I could not have seen their wings and claws so clearly; I could not have appreciated the intricate beauty of their feathers and beaks. Had it not been for their deaths, I could not have seen what made them live.... with them dead, I took in—with awe—their parts and proportions, saw in their stillness what made a snowy owl a snowy owl and not an Eastern screech. Death had something to give." "Grief," she goes on, "puts into relief our mortal state. All die, says Ecclesiastes. All must die, it is written in the first statute of the Magna Carta. Grief is at the heart of the human condition.... There is a grace in death." We adamantly reject any arguments that turn grief into a necessity and a lesson in the preciousness of life and we reject any dignity of death. Kay R., Jamison, *Nothing Was the Same: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 134.

contents of our moral imaginary struck the roots so deeply and thoroughly that they can no longer be defended with any theoretical rigor, yet they continue to guide our behavior, often without us even realizing it.

As I will be explicating throughout this work, we need to understand the role of temporality in the alleviation of suffering vis-à-vis Ophir's supposition that evil is socially produced and distributed, shifting our attention from searching for the causes of evil to its reduction. In other words, as I suggested a moment ago, we seek to understand evil strictly from the vantage point of minimizing it. Indeed, "evil is above all what ought not to be, but what must be fought against."<sup>28</sup> If we start distancing ourselves from the reign of universal, historical time seen as an iron-clad, inexorable succession of formally identical moments ("The clock ticks regularly," notes Jean Amery),<sup>29</sup> in order to make space for thinking through affective temporality, a temporality in which we encounter what's good and what's bad for us and in which either joy or sorrow organizes our sense of past, present, and future in drastically different ways, a new possibility for awakening moral agency emerges here. "The ability to dissipate suffering," Ophir notes, "is related to the ability to deconstruct this temporality and sometimes based on it."<sup>30</sup> Importantly, this is not to invalidate 'clock time' or to put it out of work, as if such a thing were even possible. It is, I argue, simply not morally relevant.

According to Ophir, "when what is present causes the one presented with it sorrow, suffering, or damage, or when what is present is the sorrow, the suffering, or the

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 75th Anniversary Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. (December, 1985), pp. 635-648.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Amery, *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>30</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 275.

damage itself, the discrete temporalization is preferable....”<sup>31</sup> This is to say, what is needed here is the temporality that frees one from continuous agony. It thus seems that our task is, as Ophir suggests, to find out what the sufferer needs to be disengaged from in order for their agony to be alleviated. Let me return to the example of my personal experience. During the darkest time of my life, what did I need to be freed from for my suffering to subside? It was, simply put, the fact of my fiancé’s death. Since no such thing was or could ever be possible, it appeared that I could not hope to experience my present differently. However, my sense of being chained to the unbearable ‘now’ (it is the ‘now’ of both clinging to and being persecuted by what cannot be undone) was in fact fractured, time and again, when the people who knew what was happening came over, held my hand as I cried, or took me out for a walk. Thus, while my situation did not formally change, my sense of time started to crumble. It changed or got destabilized enough for me to catch a glimpse of a less terrible affective reality because others disrupted the duration of my suffering. They asserted their moral agency through the re-shaping of my temporality, however brief it was and could ever be. As Ophir states, “urgency is a moral category.” Ignoring the imperative of moral urgency and deferring our response to a plea for help means that letting someone’s suffering go on without any disruption is likely to be their point of no return, akin to the fatal tightening of the noose. The excuses for deferring help lie in the space between the moral sensibility that revolts in the face of a specific other’s suffering and the moral sensibility that aims to alleviate suffering for the greatest number of people, in which case deferral may appear necessary. This continuum of sensibility will be under discussion as well later.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 184.

Two things need to be clarified here. First of all, while it may not always be possible to remove the root of their torment for the victim, their suffering is inseparable from the circumstances surrounding them, such that, taking my example, there is the death of someone I loved and there is ‘being alone with it,’ combined with my very mundane and yet crucial inability to afford grief counseling. The very presence of compassionate others may be enough to fragment the duration of one’s suffering and it is the very least that must be expected morally. However, this is *not* to say that the worst experiences are made easier to bear if only we offer the suffering one our company. What it shows, rather, is that even something *so minimal* as our company has the potential for re-shaping the tortured time-sense of a suffering other. I am convinced that more others will be compelled to rupture the victim’s reality temporalized by suffering only when the efficacy of this rupturing is made clear through a rethinking of the constellation of time, suffering, and the world,<sup>32</sup> of moral agency and what deadens it (e.g., while the common wisdom teaches us that time heals all wounds, I will argue that genuine healing is possible only when we acknowledge the possibilities for prevention or alleviation that were either taken up or missed), and of the non-equivalence of victims, thus bringing us closer to the task of rendering the moral actions of others more consistent. Barring that, we can appeal only to the vaguely defined goodwill of the addressees and, worse yet, their actions stand no chance of becoming elevated to a moral model.

In asking, “What does the sufferer need to be disengaged from?” it is imperative that we study, examine, and understand *both* the affective reality of the victims and their socio-political circumstances, which include, among other things, the degree of one’s

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<sup>32</sup> According to Amery, we become ‘bundles of time’ only when the world recedes into the distance. Amery, *On Aging*, 21.

abandonment, health, and access to support channels. The answer to this question will be inevitably contingent on the situation of the suffering other in its highest concreteness and singularity. This brings together the question of temporality and attention to one's very concrete situation for the purposes of responding to their plight in a way that my work only begins to explicate.

More broadly, my point here is that we take up our agency when it is clarified for us that we have the capacity to influence the victim's sense of time, which means the recognition of the *plasticity of time*. If evil is socially produced *and* superfluous, the experience of suffering is the clearest expression of this superfluity, since suffering is precisely for nothing [*pour rien*, following Levinas]. This makes suffering not just one type of evil among several others, but rather its paradigm. In studying the experience of suffering, its relation to time, and its conditions of alleviation further, a connection between temporality and production begins to emerge as well. Just as an instance of evil is produced and is thus open to change, the experience of this evil, defined by its particular temporality, is also open to disruption and fragmentation.

I thus submit that we take up our moral agency when we embrace a very different understanding of time, the time that is affective and plastic, and that it is up to us to choose to work a fissure in the monolithic duration of one's torment or to let the suffering go on unchallenged. The task of the present work is to clarify and present the possibility of this choice.

Finally, my hope is that the work under consideration will start bridging the gap between moral practice and philosophy, which is increasingly indistinguishable from a purely intellectual pursuit for its own sake, thus reviving the ancient tradition of practical



wisdom.<sup>33</sup> We study the production of evils, the experiences and socio-political circumstances of the concrete suffering others, and different modes of time, as carefully and rigorously as possible, so that our response to human torment can rise to the challenge of its specificity. This is to say, my work is *prescriptive* in its character, to the extent that every problem I engage with lends itself, in one way or another, to practical application, and every account of the victim's reality is carefully evaluated from the standpoint of the task of responding to it morally.

To be sure, it does not escape my notice that the problematic in question is a kind of recasting of the ancient inquiry into fatalism (“forgive them, they believe in fatality and are therefore fatal themselves”)<sup>34</sup> and its opposite, where universal time, with the things that happen in it, is decidedly outside of human influence. The affective temporality I am positing here means that time is no longer only universal, apolitical, and ‘innocent.’ Time is no longer the form of all our cognition, but, reluctantly, its object. In the space of affective temporality, a failure to take up an opportunity for minimizing torment or damage is also a failure to recognize the plastic and man-made nature of this time. In an age when we are bombarded with depictions of suffering in every news outlet, from every direction, at every waking hour, when ignorance can no longer be an excuse for complacency and yet when the specific, localized ways of alleviation have not been sufficiently articulated, it is particularly important to study different expressions of suffering, situate them as concretely as possible, and to acquire a new sense of moral

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<sup>33</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the wonderful work by Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Chichester: Wiley, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Lispector, “The Burned Sinner and the Harmonious Angels,” *The Complete Stories* (New York: New Directions, 2015). Kindle ed.

agency vis-à-vis the vastness and omnipresence of human torment. It is particularly important to resist the urge to flee from this omnipresence of undifferentiated suffering in the direction of complacency or passivity, as opposed to undertaking the work of differentiation and assessing our capacities for alleviation in light of it.

I began this introduction by referencing my personal experience and this is how I will end it. “Everyone, everyone deserves a day in court,” wrote Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. When I was discussing my experiences with an academic advisor, I said, “I am *prepared* to go to court and to present the facts, the facts that show that the degree of suffering in my life has been so high that I *deserve* urgent attention to my situation.” I am prepared to go to court and to let the weight and stubbornness of facts speak for themselves. Furthermore, I believe that my suffering deserves a greater moral urgency not because, in going from one ordeal to the next, I have acquired a sense of unwarranted superiority, but because my access to every support channel one can imagine has been thoroughly blocked. Which is to say that the illness that turned my body into living ruins (“the body is a thing that, when ill, we carry.”)<sup>35</sup> and keeps casting a shadow of chronic pain over my days, as well as the death of the man I was going to marry, are only one part of what goes into this particular scene of suffering. In my own moral time, I am holding on to every missed possibility of making my life more livable that could and ought to have taken place, but, time and again, did not.

By abstracting an instance of suffering from its messy, worldly circumstances, we solidify the sacred halo around it. But it is not the sacredness that is needed here. What we need is a recoil from the *obscene* fact that a lot of victims are still actively denied

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<sup>35</sup> Clarice Lispector, “Beauty and the Beast or The Enormous Wound,” *Selected Cronicas: Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1996), Kindle ed.

access to mechanisms of alleviation and even more people or addressees remain content in their complacency. It is equally obscene that the category of victimhood can be framed as an advantage, if not become fashionable (Siebers claims, for instance, that minorities, with the suffering that often comes with exclusion and for other reasons, occupy a vantage point outside of ‘the system’ that allows them to discern its internal contradictions and critique its injustices, thus granting an epistemic privilege to the excluded and marginalized),<sup>36</sup> while many victims are sinking deeper and deeper into social abandonment. The gap between those who bear the memory of suffering but are no longer suffering and those whose entire sense of past, present, and future is organized by their torment (“every moment of the present carries with it the entire duration of suffering”)<sup>37</sup> must be made unmistakably clear. There are victims whose suffering can still be fragmented, due to its ongoing nature, and there are victims whose torment has already been dissipated, as much as it is possible, such that the former command moral urgency and the latter require a substantially different mode of acknowledging their past suffering.

In short, suffering has the chance of becoming a true scandal in our existence only when we articulate it in its superfluity, evil, its relation to production,<sup>38</sup> and patterns of distribution. In presenting human torment as the clearest expression of evil, the questions of evil and suffering are finally, fatally yoked together. To justify one is to justify the other, keeping in mind that every justification stifles a sense of revolt. I believe that it is

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<sup>36</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 274.

<sup>38</sup> For instance, while my illness is *probably* natural (the medical professionals have been remarkably silent about its origin), the abandonment I have been subjected to because of it, scant access to medical services, and lack of both the proper living conditions and assistive equipment have nothing natural about them.

the task of any moral inquiry worthy of its name to widen the gap between evil and necessity as much as possible. Every image of ruins, the ruins of a city after an air strike or the ruins of a specific mind or body, must be accompanied with the knowledge that it is all for nothing and that it is within our power to do something about it. Understanding and internalizing the idea that we have the power both to produce evil *and* to fragment the undiluted duration of someone else's suffering means that disavowing this power is the same as failing to reclaim our moral agency.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of time and passions in Spinoza's *Ethics*, thus making the figure in question an avenue into the broader problematic of evil and its prevention. The reason we go through Spinoza is because he is committed to immanence, which is to say, he does not gesture toward some *true*, eternal reality floating above our world, the way Plato would have it. If we are to think the problem of evil in its truth and concreteness, then we need to treat it as a problem of immanence, not transcendence and its temptation of theodicy. Once we are faced with the latter, we are already putting the question of evil in justificatory terms.

Beyond that, I submit that Spinoza provides us a critically important tool to rearticulate the problem of evil, which is the notion of affective temporality. Insofar as he brings together affects, time, and bodies, it is important to keep in mind that Spinoza does not see affects as sheer receptivity. It is the alchemy of immanence where ideas and bodies affect one another, bump into each other, thus highlighting their relationality. It is a kind of responsiveness that is not just yours or mine. What this means is that *we move from the subjective to the ontological*. The tools that Spinoza gives us, sometimes quite reluctantly, allow us to go beyond his philosophy of plenitude, to think with and beyond

him about the temporality of the passion, the affectivity, expressivity, and experiential fabric of evil itself.

First, I argue that while he equates time with illusion or an inadequate idea, positing the truth of eternity, time finds its way back into the Spinozist philosophy in a theoretically fruitful way. In differentiating between adequate and inadequate ideas, it turns out that both have a force of their own. Time as an inadequate idea exerts its force all the same through *passions* or *affects*, i.e., as something that human beings can experience either as a passionate time of joy or a passionate time of sorrow. Time impacts our entire embodiment insofar as it is given to us through affects. Having ‘extracted’ the idea of affective temporality from Spinoza, I raise the question of evil and conclude that we cannot address it morally on the Spinozist terms, since everything is necessary and all we can do is affirm evil. The task of the work under consideration, however, is to wedge a decisive gap between evil and necessity, affirmation, and justification. In the reign of iron-clad necessity, evil will always remain uncontested. My hope is that eventually the construct of necessity will be completely shattered, in an act of both practical, moral, and theoretical iconoclasm.

I open chapter 2 with an analysis of two traditional views on evil, in order to depart from both for what I will argue is a far more practical, worldly account. I examine St. Augustine’s argument that evil is a privation and then Hannah Arendt’s famous equation of evil with thoughtlessness, exemplified in Adolf Eichmann. I submit that the former disintegrates the scene of evil into nothingness and the latter disintegrates the scene of evil into a failure of thinking or a kind of empty subjectivity, both of which refuse any intelligibility and deny evil a being of its own. I then turn to Adi Ophir’s work

*The Order of Evils* who, in rejecting transcendence and restating the question of evil in decisively non-theist terms, construes instances of evil as a superfluous mode of being and as social production that has its patterns of distribution. He further argues that while ongoing disasters and instances of suffering may be less horrible than the past ones, their moral claim upon us is much more urgent. It is more urgent because their evil is being produced right now and can still be stopped or alleviated. Thus, the question of what catastrophes and what suffering others ought to be more ‘morally relevant’ is decided from the standpoint of time, i.e., from the standpoint of prevention or alleviation. The structure of time itself is now saturated with moral urgency and responsibility. As I will show later, evil and suffering crucially coincide in their superfluity and in their temporality, the temporality open to human ‘re-shaping.’

Furthermore, conjoining the notion of affective time and the temporal realm where evils are still open to reduction, I argue that Ophir gives us a way to disrupt someone’s suffering, which he defines as the duration of the unbearable. Challenging the monolithic continuity of suffering by infusing it with a different affect both activates a sense of moral agency within us and allows us to make different kinds of temporalization into a practice. Given Ophir’s introduction of the category of moral urgency, I argue that it further revives our moral agency and the faculty of judgment insofar as we must assess the socio-political circumstances of suffering others to determine whom I can help and how, i.e., we must determine who is facing the deepest, darkest abandonment and cannot wait. Since Ophir defines both evil and suffering in terms of superfluity, I transition to my next chapter in order to take up the phenomenon of suffering and its striking structural and experiential proximity to evil directly.

My goal in chapter 3 is to examine both the experience of and the internal structure of suffering, to solidify the link between suffering and evil. I examine Jean Amery's essay "Resentments" where he sets out to describe the internal reality of the victim. Amery describes his predicament as the time of resentments, which is also his unique moral time. I begin to examine Amery's harrowing insights by critiquing the equivalence of the victims, i.e., the idea that all victims suffer the same, in order to argue that an event of suffering (an irremediable loss or the torturer's blow) does not happen in a socio-political void. Thus, I argue that if we want to do justice to the victim's experience, we must study both the initial traumatic event *and* the circumstances around it in all of their specificity. It is undeniably true that some victims have a greater access to support channels and mechanisms of alleviation, while others sink deeper and deeper into social obscurity. Misrecognizing this inequality is seen here as the kernel of enduring pain of Amery's internal reality, since it is forced under the rubric of equivalence and the specificity of his suffering remains obscured.

What's more, I submit that the moral truth of his resentments is a failure of another's agency. In other words, one's experience of suffering necessarily, viscerally, and irrevocably indexes others as either exercising their moral agency or failing to do so, as being present or absent, as extending a helping hand or turning a blind eye to one's torment. Suffering occasions a moral judgment on the part of the one in distress vis-à-vis those who could have helped, but did not, the judgment the victim has to live with and by haunted by. According to my argument, the only way to alleviate Amery's ongoing torment is to face up to our failure of agency, to admit that *we could have acted otherwise*, and to assume this agency in our inhabiting of the world thereafter. In so

doing, I construe the victim's affective reality as a repository of inconvenient truths and argue that moral agency *qua* the ability to act otherwise in the face of human torment has its origin not in the illusion of the self-sufficient subject and its freedom, but in the sufferer's affectivity. To do justice to the experience of the victims, we must both take up our agency that corresponds *directly* to their vision of and the shattered desire for it and to undermine the idea that all victims suffer the same through carefully evaluating the circumstances surrounding their event of suffering.

Lastly, I argue that holding on to moral time is refusing to forget that the possibilities of reducing his pain were available, yet not taken up, and that others in the proximity to his scene of suffering could have been morally present, but were not. To give up moral time is to give up the hope that others are capable of acting otherwise in the face of human torment.

My final chapter engages with perhaps the most influential thinker of ethics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Continental philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas, through the lens of Ophir and Amery. I reaffirm his assertion that ethics, seen as an encounter with the other in torment, is indeed primary because we ought to think and act from the vantage point of someone's suffering. Levinas places pure alterity and the suffering other at the center of his moral thinking, as something that can drastically change our comportment in the world and reorient us from indifference or moral 'lostness' toward the efforts to minimize an other's agony. However, he separates radical alterity from the world and being, since he equates the latter with the primacy of the same, such that there is no place for pure individuality or singularity. I believe that in conjoining suffering with pure alterity, Levinas helps us understand with an aching lucidity that suffering is radically superfluous and



inassimilable, like a needle-sharp foreign object in the human body. Moreover, in suffering, the value of one concrete individual is either affirmed or denied, since we either attempt to offer them relief or we choose not to. However, this is where I begin to rearticulate Levinasian insights against Levinas, returning to the theoretical insights given to us by Ophir and Amery. I argue that pure alterity is a key characteristic of suffering, rather than saturated human otherness. I further argue that alterity understood as the otherness of suffering is truly morally relevant because it alerts us both to the evil of human pain, the radically alien nature of suffering that runs counter our entire existence, the nature according to which the deadly force and duration of torment is more monstrous than the fatal cut of the sword, and to the role of time in it. We do not need the absolute human other to understand torment as thoroughly antithetical to human existence. It is enough, I submit, to experience the superfluity, radical foreignness, and evil of suffering and to see the experiential or affective temporality as something plastic and thus open to our influence to rise in revolt against human distress.

I conclude this chapter by pointing toward not only the imperative to respond morally to a suffering other, but also to the inclusion of the victims in the shared world. They *experience* their inclusion only if we take up the agency that before resided in their grieving eyes alone, if we do not tuck away or hide the sufferer's pain, but make it part of the shared space. in short, we do not stand beside the victims only in the acuity of their suffering. We stand beside the victims during the duration of our lifetime.

The lifetime that lasts a very long time.

## **Chapter One**

### **The Passions of Time: Time, Affect, and Evil in Spinoza**

Passion moved the body like a stranger.

—Unknown

I begin this work concerning the question of evil and suffering with an insistence on immanence or worldliness, understood as a refusal to articulate and conceptualize the phenomena we encounter in our life by pointing beyond the world and gesturing toward the unintelligible, that which radically surpasses human experience, in order to (we note the irony) to explain them. In other words, we refuse positing something other than the world we find ourselves in. In holding on to immanence, we attempt to avoid dissolving the phenomena we seek to understand and alter into mystical obscurity and ineffability. Now, as Antonio Negri puts it with regard to his influential book on Spinoza, *The Savage Anomaly*, he was able to offer “a new perspective on the interpretation of Spinoza that was part of a wider process of renewal of the traditions of thought about transformation.”<sup>39</sup> To think about transformation is to think about the fluid, plastic, dynamic nature of our existence, which is to say, about time and its duration. Thought about transformation, about experiencing change in all of its affective, intellectual, and embodied dimensions, finds its unexpected expression in the supposedly ‘eternalist’ philosopher of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to his remarkable commitment to the transformative nature of our existence and to immanence, Spinoza took human affectivity to be central in our lives. Thus, “Spinoza is thoroughly relevant to any discussion of human emotion and feeling. Spinoza saw drives, motivations, emotions, and feelings—an ensemble Spinoza called

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<sup>39</sup> Antonio Negri, *Spinoza for Our Time: Politics and Postmodernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 2.

affects—as a central aspect of humanity.”<sup>40</sup> As we will see, his conjunction of duration and affects will form the core of this chapter and will be the key building block of my moral theory, as tentative as it may be.

Spinoza’s insistence on radical immanence, construed as a rejection of the otherworldly realm from which human beings are fundamentally barred, and the power of affects challenges all visions of world and being as devoid of ethics and politics. Indeed, Negri goes on to contrast him with the negative ontology of Martin Heidegger. As

an enemy of socialism, he pretends to accept its critique of the capitalist and technological world of reification and alienation, only to switch the polarity and claim that existence entails abandonment to the purity and the nakedness of being. But being and substance are never either pure or naked: they are always made of institutions and history, and the truth issues from struggle, and from the human construction of temporality itself.<sup>41</sup>

I thus begin my theoretical journey with the thinker who, as it were, forced even seemingly pure, ‘innocent’ concepts such as divinity, eternity, and time into *this* world as an adamant rejection of transcendence or the ineffable beyond. The overarching aim here, the aim whose outcome will be pivotal to the entire trajectory of this work, is to introduce and explicate the idea of time as experience or a type of affect or passion, as distinct from biological time or Kant’s claim there is pre-given categorical time that would order all experience and therefore ethics.<sup>42</sup> In other words, it is to introduce the notion of affective temporality, defined as a kind of embodied, viscerally felt time we experience first and

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<sup>40</sup> A. R. Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Governance of Life* (London: Heinemann, 2003), 8.

<sup>41</sup> Negri, *Spinoza for Our Time*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Note that it is precisely the abstract nature of time, or the limits determined in advance, that secures the universalizability of the categorical imperative. Since time is abstract, affectivity cannot have any bearing on it and thus cannot transform it.

foremost as affects.<sup>43</sup> Given Spinoza's commitment to the notion of eternity, individuating time, time as a type of experience, seems to be foreclosed in Spinoza as well. However, I will argue that there is a way to see time as an affect or a passion on Spinoza's own terms.

In rearticulating homogenous, universal time as a time of passions, I will set the stage for my further explorations of the issues of the production of evil, suffering, and ethics in the face of what ought not to be. My use of Spinozism here could be seen as my attempt to wedge a gap between the conjunction of temporality and pre-given universality, such that clock time enables and envelops all experience but does not become available to us *as* experience. Upon this traditional reading, time is the necessary condition for all our passions or affects, for all our pains and joys, but is never reducible to them.

The question that interests me in Spinoza's *Ethics* is this: What happens to the conflicting notions of eternity and time considered from the perspective of power (*potentia*) understood as the actual essence of the immanent first cause, i.e., the first cause that does not cancel out the world? More precisely, if eternity is the proper domain of reason at its height, how do we experience time at all on Spinoza's terms? To be sure, we *do* experience time, this much is clear. What remains to be explained is how this experience is possible and what its meaning is, given Spinoza's claim that the pinnacle of reason is to recognize eternity. The task is thus to locate time within human experience,

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<sup>43</sup> From a more contemporary perspective, recall Bergson's central philosophical claim that our lived experience of time is that of duration or flow. We have to 'spatialize' this flow in order to convert it into measurements and clock time, to facilitate our everyday life. Henri Bergson, *Duration and simultaneity, with reference to Einstein's theory* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 16.

which, as I will argue, runs along the lines of conjoining the idea of time and affects or passions.

At the center of Spinoza's thought stands substance or *causa sui*, that which is self-caused. One of the characteristics of substance for Spinoza is that it is eternal.<sup>44</sup> What exactly do we mean by 'substance' though? Substance is something that requires nothing else in order to exist or to be available to reason. It is the living, all-encompassing heart of self-sufficiency, yet it is also something that cannot be separated from affective, singular beings.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, Pietersma argues that Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'flesh,' nameless and ubiquitous, is close to Spinoza's substance.<sup>46</sup> Time, on the other hand, is seen as numerical succession that is inadequate to the expression of substance, i.e., to the way substance presents itself to the intellect, and can be explained as an effect of the imperfections of the human mind. Thus, it seems that there is in fact no problematic of eternity and time in Spinoza, since the latter is only an illusion or an error of the imperfect mind.

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<sup>44</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, tr. G. H. R. Parkinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Part V, Demonstration to Proposition 30. The Latin edition I used is Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethica* (The Latin Library, May 2008), accessed on 12/05/2016, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.html>, I have also consulted Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*, tr. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> In order to illuminate the workings of understanding, Spinoza delves into a lengthy discussion about the singular beings or intensities that are unavailable to the intellect we cannot conceive of them through themselves (we cannot abstract a singular being from its relations and co-implications) and about substance, which can be conceived of through itself alone. Thus, when Spinoza claims that substance is 'prior to all affections' (see Part 1, Proposition 1), he means not an antecedence, but rather that substance is free of all affective relationalities insofar as it concerns understanding. Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Pietersma, "Merleau-Ponty and Spinoza" in *Spinoza: Critical Assessments*, Volume IV (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 312–318.

However, it is my contention that we can think the reality of both eternity and time if we take seriously Spinoza's insistence on the parallelism between the attributes of thought and extension *qua* matter (what is the case in thought is also the case in matter and vice versa, somewhat akin to the Hermetic maxim 'As Above, So Below') as well as the real distinction between these two attributes, which means that the two mirror each other while remaining separate. To say that it is the infinite power of the first cause that both unites and holds in separation thought and matter is perhaps also to say that it is the same power that both unites and holds in separation time (understood, at least tentatively, in a non-numerically dynamic, affective way) and eternity. One could say that it is precisely this very power that accounts both for the real difference between the temporal and the a-temporal and the radical equality of the two.<sup>47</sup> This is important to us in at least two ways.

First, the reading of time and eternity in Spinoza that I will suggest attempts to bring to the fore the innovative nature of the Spinozist appropriation of these notions, not to mention the highly original nature of his philosophy as such. Indeed, it is my contention that the real equality and difference between the temporal and the a-temporal both demonstrate the uniqueness of Spinoza's thought and serves as a significant contribution to contemporary discussions of time. Second, and this is to substantiate my first point, such a reading might help us to extract the hidden dimensions of the temporal

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<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that it is not my intention to suggest an analogy or establish a strict symmetry between the thought-and-matter dyad and the time-and-eternity. As I hope to make clear later in the text, any pre-established distribution of the temporal and the eternal would contradict the originality of Spinoza's understanding of these questions. However, it is my view that the logic of the absolute power (the divine expressivity that ensures both the multiplicity and the equality of the attributes) can be fruitfully applied to the notions of time and eternity.

and the a-temporal both in thought and matter, or, more precisely, human embodiment. In other words, it might begin to reconfigure the set of complications around the question of time, one of which is that, on the one hand, time is considered as purely internal, i.e., intrinsic to thought (synthesizing our experiences, while governing and remaining ‘above’ them) and, on the other hand, alien to it (the ideas composing thought enjoy the notoriously a-temporal status, while the things of which they are the ideas bring their finitude from without).<sup>48</sup> If we interpret time and eternity as equally necessary parts of the infinite divine expressivity (i.e., the divine power that expresses itself in an infinity of ways), it becomes possible to incorporate both of these notions into the dynamic individuation of the human mind<sup>49</sup> and the construction of lived experience. That is, the temporal and the a-temporal are essentially interwoven with experience.

Spinoza understands time to be the units by which the human mind marks and measures specific periods of duration.<sup>50</sup> The reason why a particular durational unit is chosen to measure the durations of things and events is entirely conventional and depends on the point of view and purpose of a person. Duration, however, is itself indivisible and non-numerical. It is said to be “the indefinite continuation of existing.”<sup>51</sup> The reason it is said to be indefinite is because it can be limited extrinsically (by an encounter with

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<sup>48</sup> For a useful summary of the internal nature of time and Bergson’s attempt to restore the absolute reality of time outside consciousness, see Camille Pernot, “Brèves remarques sur la notion de temps” in *Architectures de la raison: Melanges offerts à Alexandre Matheron*, ed. Pierre François Moreau (Fontenay, St. Cloud: Editions ENS, 1996), pp. 233-47.

<sup>49</sup> The way in which different experiences of time influence and transform our cognitive trajectory.

<sup>50</sup> Spinoza, Letter 12 in Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Letters*, tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), IV/57.6 Ibid., *Ethics*, Part II, Definition 5.7, Spinoza, Letter 12, 5.8 Ibid., *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 16.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., *Ethics*, Part II, Definition 5.

something that contradicts its way of existing, e.g., a fatality), but not intrinsically, that is, by its own essence or ontologically. The enduring corporeality of all the things in the world can be divided, enumerated, and measured only in imagination, which is to say that such qualifications apply to it only extrinsically. In other words, duration and measurement are radically separated. This leads Spinoza to postulate that measure, time, and number are nothing but modes of imagining.<sup>52</sup> We could say that his notion of time is inseparable from numerical sequentiality (e.g., the appearance of the sun has a certain mathematical certainty about it), while there is nothing about extension (matter or corporeality) itself that lends itself to enumeration and division. Sequentiality is equally inseparable from imagination, which has to do with affections (*affectio*) in the sense of images or corporeal traces. What do we mean by that?

Affections refer both to the body that is being affected and the external cause of this particular affection, i.e., what brought it about.<sup>53</sup> In the broadest terms, they designate a corporeal change in the twofold sense of cause and effect. This twofoldness has to do with Spinoza's reasoning that the ideas of external things can only 'occur' inside the idea of our own body. The mind (*mens*) considers external things acting upon its body and, as it were, filters the ideas of external things through the idea of its body. Thus, anything that happens outside the body can only be given to the mind with a necessary causal reference to its corresponding body. Mind and body cannot have ideas or experiences of their own.

By the same token, time is regarded as an affection that gives us the image of our body as affected by an external body, the image that is necessarily double, i.e., 'our own'

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<sup>52</sup> Spinoza, Letter 12, 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 16.



and yet alien to us. For instance, the rising of the sun and the subsequently articulated solar time are given to a person only insofar as they affect or modify his or her body, i.e., as causing certain impressions. The body and the world are necessarily, inevitably conjoined. The mind can thus perceive infinitely many bodies as affecting its own body and measure the duration of any external body or any event by way of imagination. Thus, some of the things acting upon the body are experienced as temporal, as subject to division and enumeration. What imagination provides us with, however, are inadequate ideas, the ideas that represent not the external things of which they are the ideas, but rather *the manner* in which these external things are given to us. Indeed, inadequate ideas, we note, swarm “in the confusion of an image of thought with the activity of thinking itself... unable to relate to other ideas to produce an intensity that can displace the force of these images.”<sup>54</sup> *We take ideas to refer to the things of which they are ideas in an unproblematic way, remaining ignorant that the real content of these ideas has more to do with their impact on us than with the things that they are supposed to represent.* Ideas are thus understood from the standpoint of their impact on us, i.e., ideas are forces of different intensities. Similarly, time refers to the way duration is given to us and experienced by us without indicating anything about the nature of duration. To use the language that will be employed later in this project, this duration may be that which floods our senses, as in joy or suffering, or it may be imperceptible, an easy flow of time in the background, as it were. It can either affect us with fiery intensity or recede into the background of our habitual, everyday comportment in the world. Before discussing the

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<sup>54</sup> Stuart Pethick, *Affectivity and Philosophy After Spinoza and Nietzsche: Making Knowledge The Most Powerful Affect* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 50.

reasons for Spinoza's rejection of numerical time in greater detail, let us examine the role of power and those of affection (*affectio*) and affect (*affectus*) in this context.

In Part III, Spinoza writes that "each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persevere in its being."<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, "the endeavour by which each thing endeavours to persevere in its being is nothing other than the actual essence of the thing."<sup>56</sup> This kind of striving is necessarily inseparable from anything that is actual and amounts to the famous doctrine of the *conatus*, which could be understood as power, force, desire, or appetite.<sup>57</sup> Together with substance, the *conatus* forms another pillar of Spinoza's thought. To speak of any actually existing thing is the same as speaking of its relation to its own being, the way it subsists in existence. As Spinoza puts it, "the power, i.e., the endeavour, of each thing by which, either alone or with others, it either acts or endeavours to act" is the necessary consequence of the actuality of each given thing.<sup>58</sup> This necessary relation of a thing to its being is to remain in existence, which means staving off whatever contradicts or thwarts its power of existing. Thus, the *conatus* is clearly aligned with perseverance in one's existence, i.e., it is to act and to be acted on in a way that increases one's power.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Proposition 7.

<sup>57</sup> While Spinoza will speak specifically of desire (*cupiditas*) and appetite (*appetitus*) in relation to the *conatus*, it seems safe to suggest that these phenomena are fundamentally interrelated and in a certain sense can stand for one another.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Demonstration of Proposition 7.

<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Butler convincingly argues that Spinoza's desire to persevere in one's existence is a far cry from clear-cut individualism, where the self attempts to maintain its life at the expense of others. In her words, "depending on what kind of response a being undergoes, that being stands a chance of diminishing or enhancing its own possibility of future perseverance and life. This being desires not only to persevere in its own being, but to live in a world that reflects and furthers the possibility of that perseverance... to live means to participate in life, and life itself will be a term that equivocates between the "me" and the "you," taking up both of us in its sweep and dispersion. Desiring life produces an *ek-stasis* in the midst of desire, a dependence on an externalization,

The identity of power and action is validated and affirmed by the idea that *all power is necessarily related to the capacity for affecting and being affected, to a being-able-to in the general sense*. This capacity for causing change is enacted by affections, i.e., by one body acting upon and thereby causing change in another body. Spinoza immediately adds that “the endeavour by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves, not a finite, but an indefinite time.”<sup>60</sup> This indefinite time is of course duration, i.e., existence itself. Yet, duration can be given to us in many ways.

But how are we to understand this relation to the power that each given thing has in Spinoza’s thought taken more broadly? To start answering this question, we need to drastically shift our attention from the actually given multiple bodies to their immanent cause that is radically singular. Substance, God, or nature (*natura naturans*, which means nature in the sense of pure activity or creative production) is that which gives rise to all things and does so insofar as it has the absolute power (*potentia*) identical to its essence.<sup>61</sup> This is to say that the infinite power of substance is nothing other than the infinite power of its existence in the sense that the divine existence does not need any cause apart from itself.<sup>62</sup> To be a substance is to be in itself and conceived through itself, i.e., it is not to need “the concept of another thing, from which concept it must be formed.”<sup>63</sup>

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something that is palpably not-me, without which no perseverance is possible.” Judith Butler, “The Desire to Live: Spinoza’s *Ethics* under Pressure,” in Victoria Kahn, et al., *Politics and the Passions, 1500-1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 112-13.

<sup>60</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Proposition 8.

<sup>61</sup> By ‘active nature’ Spinoza understands “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, or, such attributes of substance as express eternal and infinite essence.” *Ibid.*, Part I, Scholium to Proposition 29.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Proposition 34.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, Definition 3.

What is important here is that we attend to the way in which an immanent cause differs from a transitive one. A cause is called transitive when it is essentially different from the effect it produces, i.e., when the two do not coincide in a substantial way, or when it immediately withdraws from its effect. A craftsman producing a piece of furniture and remaining radically different from it is a good example of this kind of causality. A more familiar story is of the Judeo-Christian God who remains radically irreducible to his creation insofar as this creation takes place out of God's free will and is accidental. Put otherwise, God's existence is necessary, while the existence of his creation is utterly contingent, which is something we are well familiar with due to traditional theology. A cause is said to be immanent when there is no radical separation between it and the effect it produces. More precisely, "God is the cause of all things in the same sense as he is cause of himself."<sup>64</sup> The cause and its effect are not split into necessity and contingency inasmuch as there is equal necessity to both of them. For Spinoza, substance does not need any external cause to bring it into existence and to conserve its being precisely because its ability to exist is infinitely great. 'To be self-caused' and 'to exist infinitely and eternally' are enfolded in the ability or power that constitutes its essence. This is to say that the absolute power of substance is absolute not because it was able to create something radically different from itself, but rather because there is no limit to its productivity. The expression of the absolute power cannot be limited simply because there is no other power that would be opposed to it. This power is the power to exist in the infinity of expressions without ever being different from or more necessary than its expressions.

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<sup>64</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 103.

Finally, it is crucial to note that God's power is active and actual, which is why it should be sharply distinguished from the notion of power as lack or the potential for destruction. The common people, Spinoza notes, "say that God has the power of destroying everything and of reducing it to nothing."<sup>65</sup> In other words, they understand God as being able to do something and yet not doing it. According to this view, divine acts are contingent and dependent solely on his free will. However, nothing could be further from Spinoza's understanding of these matters. God's very existence *qua* power is entirely identical to acting, such that the two are strictly synonymous. There are no possibilities that exist in the divine intellect and may or may not be actualized. Indeed, "it is just as impossible for us to conceive that God does not act as it is impossible for us to conceive that God does not exist."<sup>66</sup> His power is thus fundamentally different from the power (*potestas*) of kings that lacks something and therefore requires a transition to actuality, a kind of acquisition of and striving for power. God's power as actuality is the very guarantor of immanence if we understand immanence in the literal sense of 'remaining within.'<sup>67</sup>

Thus, the absolute power of the cause of all things<sup>68</sup> is one insofar as it is defined as the pure act of existing. It first appears that nothing could be more abstract than this existing devoid of any determinations. However, Spinoza immediately adds that the essence of God is expressed in the infinity of attributes, which is a term we saw earlier.<sup>69</sup> What is then an attribute? It is "what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting

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<sup>65</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Scholium after Proposition 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> From late Latin *immanent*- 'remaining within,' from *in*- 'in' + *manere* 'remain.'

<sup>68</sup> "There must follow, from the necessity of the divine nature, infinite things in infinite ways." Ibid., Part I, Proposition 16.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., Definition 6.

its essence.”<sup>70</sup> Put otherwise, it is the way in which the essence of substance is given to the mind.<sup>71</sup> Although Spinoza insists that there are infinite attributes, the human mind perceives only two of them, i.e., thought and extension or matter. To recall Deleuze’s apt formulation, “the essence that is expressed is an unlimited, infinite quality. The expressive attribute relates essence to substance and it is this immanent relation that the intellect grasps. All the essences, distinct in the attributes, are as one in substance, to which they are related by the attributes.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, thought and extension lead us back to substance. What is important to underscore here is that there are two equally fundamental ways of conceiving power. One is as the pure power of existence understood as substance, the power outside all determinations. The other is as the distinct powers of the attributes and modes that are nonetheless fully expressive of substance. In other words, the latter way of understanding substance refers to thought and extension and their modal affections (roughly speaking, modes are the properties of thinking and extended things) insofar as they immanently and infinitely express the absolute power.

Let us now take a step back from the perspective of power *qua* substance and focus on the powers of thought and matter as well as on their relation to the *conatus* and affection. Which is to say, let us examine how we relate to the absolute power of existence from out of the network of multiple intensities (i.e., all the external factors that affect us in various ways) that allows us to increase or decrease our own power of existence.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Definition 4.

<sup>71</sup> For a more recent discussion of the admittedly obscure relationship between attributes and substance, see David Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 51.

First of all, the insistence on the equality of the power pertaining to thought and the power pertaining to matter is of paramount importance. According to Spinoza, that which is true for things (broadly understood as the outside of thought) is true for thought itself.<sup>73</sup> Thought and matter, as was indicated before, are paradoxically one in their non-identity. This parallelism between the body and the mind means that since the mind is a mode of thinking and since it is proper for an individual to have an essence, the essence of the mind consists in that which is most intrinsic to thinking, i.e., an idea.<sup>74</sup> But what is this idea? The key object of the mind's idea is the being of the body in all of its actuality and its affective encounters with other bodies. As Deleuze puts it, "the idea that we are is to thought and to other ideas what the body that we are is to extension and to other bodies."<sup>75</sup> Since the mind and the body are the modes of two distinct attributes and yet they necessarily correspond to one another, each thing is at the same time the body and the mind, embodiment and thinking. The first reason why this is significant for us is that the power that aids or counteracts the individual's perseverance in existence may reside either on the side of thought or on the side of materiality. The second reason is that here we get the idea of how power remains univocal (said of both mind and body) and yet involves a real difference.<sup>76</sup> The power to endure in existence is one, yet it also harbors real distinctions.

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<sup>73</sup> "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 7.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, Axiom 3 and Proposition 11.

<sup>75</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 86.

<sup>76</sup> A more implicit work that the emphasis on the equality and real distinctness of thought and matter is doing here refers to the possible 'realignment' of the temporal and atemporal with respect to these attributes. This twofold relationship between thought and matter seems to 'split' *each* of these attributes into the temporal and the eternal. As I see it, this split within one attribute itself undergoes change and actively changes the split

The possibility of an increase or decrease of individual power finally highlights for us the full significance of affections and affects. According to Deleuze, the difference between affection and affect is not that the former refers to the body, while the latter refers to the mind. The real difference is between the body's affection and idea which is the idea of the external body (i.e., the change and the necessary presence of the cause of that change), and the affect, which has to do with an increase or decrease of the power of acting and can refer to both the body and the mind. Indeed, "the *affectio* refers to a state of the affected body and implies the presence of the affecting body, whereas the *affectus* refers to the passage from one state to another, taking into account the correlative variation of the affecting bodies."<sup>77</sup> We could say that the affection names an encounter between two bodies and that the affect names the *difference* that this encounter has for our existence and our body. With regard to the latter, let us note that

bodies change and their senses and feelings are transient and instable, whereas our ideas and concepts are far more stable and truth as such is permanence itself. However, rather than this constant change and variability being considered as a weakness or a hindrance to life, Spinoza accepts it as the essential way in which we live and therefore something to be affirmed and appreciated... affectivity, the constant sense of transience and 'inbetween-ness' that relates each and every discernible experience of the world...<sup>78</sup>

In a certain sense, then, affect indexes the degree of proximity or separation between our power of acting and the infinite power. It is the work of affects vis-à-vis our embodiment that interests us here.

Having discussed action in its finite and infinite dimensions (the actions that we are capable of and the pure abundance of actuality that we strive to attain by way of our

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within the other attribute. All of this is to say that the ratio of the temporal and the atemporal is itself subject to a paradoxical kind of dynamic openings and refractions.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>78</sup> Pethick, *Affectivity and Philosophy After Spinoza and Nietzsche*, 18.



actions), we can thus say that the experience of time belongs to the region of affections and affects. Time is an affection of the body insofar as it references the affecting body (e.g., the rising sun or the nightfall) over against the one that is affected. More importantly, it can also be an affect of the body and the mind alike inasmuch as it introduces a difference into our relation to our existence.<sup>79</sup> This is to say that time itself is an affective route, however indirect, to the power of enduring in existence. Some affects enhance our power to persevere in existence by infusing our body with exuberance and some affects put us on our knees in crushing torment. While I will return to this idea later, it is important to note that happy emotions change our experience of transience (the old wisdom teaches us that the arrow of time flies fast when we are happy) and sorrowful emotions make our experience of time slow, anguished, overwhelming our senses with pain alone, which is the experience time standing still, without a helping hand and without solace. What I am calling ‘an affective temporality’ thus ties into the joys and sorrows of our existence, such that it either enhances our being or depletes it.<sup>80</sup>

However, the fact is that Spinoza allows for little ambiguity when he speaks of the divine essence as eternal, thus appearing to repeat the more familiar gesture of privileging the a-temporal over the temporal. Any relation that the affects of time might have to an increase or decrease of our power is insignificant with regard to the infinite

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<sup>79</sup> David Savan, “Spinoza on Duration, Time, and Eternity” in *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions*, ed. Graeme Hunter (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 3-31.

<sup>80</sup> Note Spinoza’s claim that “an emotion toward a thing which we imagine merely in itself, and not as necessary, possible, or contingent, is the greatest of all emotions, other things being equal.” He thus postulates that the emotions or affects of reason, as that which is able to recognize the things that are free, i.e., in themselves, are the most powerful. Therefore, the affects stemming from this recognition are what impact us the most. Yet, this is an impact to reason, comparable, perhaps, to the rush one gets from making a major scientific discovery. However, I believe that other affects can have a stronger *bodily* impact. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 5.

power understood as eternal. Not only an outright inadequate, ‘cut-up,’ fluctuating time is excluded from the divine nature, but even unlimited duration seems to be subsumed under the sign of eternity. Let us discuss the reasons for this emphasis on eternity in greater detail, in order to return to our discussion of affective temporality.

In the definition that strangely echoes one of duration, eternity is said to be “existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow from the definition alone of the eternal thing.”<sup>81</sup> This definition applies, first and foremost, to substance and its power to give rise to everything else. Indeed, “eternity is the very essence of God.”<sup>82</sup> However, it is also said of modes, which means that it is said of any finite entities.<sup>83</sup> Two points need to be unpacked here. First, the very extension of eternity into finite modes is decidedly new when compared to the ancient and medieval accounts of eternity. To take just one example, Spinoza rejects Plato’s notion of eternity *qua* timelessness because Plato gives the status of timelessness to ideas, the principles of logic, and mathematical truths.<sup>84</sup> These instances of the timeless are formally necessary on Plato’s part. Apart from being a nominalist<sup>85</sup> who cannot accept the existence of universals, Spinoza understands that these instances are determinate (i.e., we can say *what* they are, point to their form) whereas pure existence is indeterminate. What is properly eternal is indeterminate precisely because it is *capable of producing any determination*. Furthermore, its fundamental indetermination stems from the fact that in substance essence and existence

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., Part I, Definition 8.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Part V, Demonstration of Proposition 30.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., Proposition 21.

<sup>84</sup> Savan, “Spinoza on Duration, Time, and Eternity,” ed. Hunter, *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions*, 14-5.

<sup>85</sup> Nominalism is a doctrine, according to which universals or names have no corresponding reality to what they name, such that, in the final account, only particulars are real.

are identical. This identity means that substance cannot be a member of any class, for if we were able to point to it as this or that, it would suggest that it subsists as a pure existent and as *this* or *that* thing, which would indicate a split between essence and existence. Finally, mathematical timeless entities are abstract and whatever follows from them is also abstract. This is where we begin to see that Spinoza's indetermination is to be taken in the most real and concrete sense. Indeed, mathematical entities and their relations are opposed to the limitless productive activity of nature.<sup>86</sup>

The second point that needs to be addressed here has to do with the reasons why Spinoza wants to hold on to the fundamental characteristic of power as eternity, however revised this notion may be. Why should he insist on eternity and not be content with everlasting duration, as one would perhaps expect given the similarity that the definitions of eternity and duration share? What kind of work does the notion of eternity do for him? According to Spinoza, "nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow."<sup>87</sup> But what does he mean by effect? To exist and thus to make an effect on something is to cause a change in something else. It is an expression of and an impact on the *conatus*, which could be loosely compared to a wave changing and itself being changed by other waves. Any change is a motion that takes place in time, that has a beginning and an end, a before and an after. However, what happens when we start to explain one motion by another motion? The problem we immediately run into is that of the infinite regress, in which one thing is explained in terms of another thing that is essentially similar to it, and thus itself needs to be explained by something prior or external to it. The motive chain itself needs an explanatory principle. The way out of the problem of change that infinitely

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<sup>86</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 16.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

spreads out in time is to refer to the a-temporal dimension that underlies this change.<sup>88</sup> It is precisely the eternity that does the necessary work and not the duration, everlasting or not, for the latter implies at least a conceptual division into a before and an after.

However, it is important to emphasize that Spinoza here does not revert to the traditional model of ‘distributing’ time and eternity as a rigid, pre-given framework and does not say that while the first cause is eternal, its effects are bound by time. Joining the first cause and eternity on the one hand and effects and time on the other would amount to placing the first cause ‘outside’ the world, i.e., outside of its effect. If Spinoza wants to maintain his commitment to immanent causation, he would have to radically reduce the gap between the first cause and its effects as well as the gap between time and eternity. This is the reason why we can assert that since it is one power that is expressed by both the first cause and by all of its effects, the eternal dimension is also necessary for finite things.<sup>89</sup> A singular act of expressing the first cause on the part of a singular entity must involve the a-temporal, as a reference to substance. Any change by which the all-encompassing power is expressed necessarily involves a paradoxical kind of tension that gives rise to change, but remains different from it. Change itself carries within it a difference from itself. *My key thesis here is that change does not consist of the succession*

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<sup>88</sup> Here it is useful to recall Hobbes’ definition of the *conatus*. According to him, endeavor is “motion made in less space and time than can be given.” “That is,” he continues, “less than can be determined or assigned by exposition or number.” Thomas Hobbes, *De Corpore*, Part III, 15. A Xerox copy. No further information available.

<sup>89</sup> Recall Moreau’s impressive study entitled *Spinoza, l’expérience et l’éternité* where the author discusses Spinoza’s claim that eternity is given to our experience in one way or another. It seems that taking seriously *both* experience and eternity yields a problematic that is not too different from mine. See Pierre-Francois Moreau, *Spinoza, l’expérience et l’éternité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994).

*of moments homogenous in their form. Rather that each instance of transition can in fact entail a transition to something genuinely different.*

What we see here is that every single phenomenon is necessarily composed of both the temporal and the a-temporal. It is temporal insofar as it acts and is acted upon, i.e., changes and is being changed. It is eternal insofar as its power of acting as a being-in-motion (both in the active and the passive sense) refers to that which underlies and explains this being-in-motion. Finally, eternity is listed as one of the characteristics of substance precisely because it emphasizes the power insofar as it is one (i.e., capable of expressing *all* motions) and not insofar as it is expressed by the infinite number of singular things and their motions. It is only when we understand the true cause of the infinite expressions of power that we attain a proper relation to the power that we ourselves are.

Now I would like to expand the discussion of those affects whose reference to the absolute power in the singular remains obscured, which will be a discussion of the force of inadequate ideas. As long as our affects come from an encounter with an external body and are explained by the necessarily inadequate idea of that body, they are called passions. This is to say that such affects are passions because we ourselves are only a partial cause of these affects, i.e., we are passive in relation to them.<sup>90</sup> It is important to note that we do not see ‘beyond’ these ideas, just like we do not see ‘beyond’ affects. It is our *relation* to them that is subject to change.

Spinoza divides passions into joyful and sad ones. Pleasure is linked to the passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection, which means that its power is

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<sup>90</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Definition 2.

increased. Pain, in its turn, is associated with the mind's transition to a lesser perfection or with a decrease in power.<sup>91</sup> But why is it that joy, understood as an increase in power, is still a passion and not an action? It is a passion "in so far as a man's power of acting is not increased to such an extent that it conceives adequately itself and its actions."<sup>92</sup> Thus, the passivity comes from the confusion of understanding. A clear understanding would directly communicate the essence of the affecting body as opposed to the indirect way in which this body is implicated in our state. It would also communicate an internal affection that would harmonize our essence with all other essences and the essence of God. These two instances of clear understanding (the affecting body as it really is and an auto-affection) amount to the same grasp of the necessary interrelatedness of all things, i.e., to the understanding that all things dynamically express the power of God by affective interaction with one another.<sup>93</sup> This is when our affects become actions.<sup>94</sup> What is crucial here is that passions refer to the fluctuating degrees of power, while actions name the full possession of it. For example, the stream of water may increase or diminish, but the essence of water understood as the constancy of power cannot change. Since actions are understood as constancy, the action in the fullest sense that Spinoza reserves for blessedness would be eternal. Eternal actions no longer depend on transitions, but "express themselves and one another in an eternal mode, together with the adequate ideas from which they issue."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., Scholium to Proposition 11.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., Part IV, Demonstration of Proposition 59.

<sup>93</sup> If we recall that the idea of the mind is its own body, we see that both instances amount to the self *insofar as it experiences itself as fully and necessarily inserted into the order of things*.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., Part III, Proposition 1.

<sup>95</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 51.

However, Spinoza makes a striking claim that “the mind, both in so far as it has clear and distinct ideas and in so far as it has confused ideas, endeavours to persevere in its being for an indefinite duration, and is conscious of this endeavour.”<sup>96</sup> The mind ‘lives from’ ideas and affects regardless of whether they are adequate or not. *This claim inaugurates a strong emphasis on the real and inevitably strong character of passions in Spinoza.* To make it clear, there is nothing illusory about affects. Indeed, we are not to look “beyond affectivity to see what *really* lies behind the ways in which bodies affect each other to get to the true essence of a particular entity, but rather look precisely to affectivity and its sense of temporality...”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, they are part of nature and are as reflective of the all-encompassing dynamism as everything else.<sup>98</sup> The same is true for inadequate ideas, where we remain ignorant of the true causes of particular effects. Given the necessary reality of passions and the inadequate ideas that they form, the task of the mind is to establish a specific relation to these ideas, the relation that would be as inclusive of the absolute power as possible.

Once again, here we have the irreducibly two-sided approach that characterizes Spinoza’s commitment to immanence in the sense that the mind paradoxically conceives both the reality of inadequate ideas and their fundamental inclusion in the power of substance. Thus, the mind recognizes the force that inadequate ideas exercise on it and enacts the necessary ‘dissolution’ of these ideas in the power that is one. The inevitability of inadequate, weaker ideas is repeatedly encapsulated by Spinoza’s words that “there exists no particular thing in the universe such that there does not exist another thing

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<sup>96</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 9.

<sup>97</sup> Pethick, *Affectivity and Philosophy After Spinoza and Nietzsche*, 39.

<sup>98</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Demonstration of Proposition 59.

which is more powerful than it.”<sup>99</sup> Our force of existence is necessarily limited and “infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes.”<sup>100</sup> It is thus only necessary that we are subject to changes of which we are not the adequate cause. Moreover, the ‘power by which we strive to persevere in existing’ and the ‘power of external causes’ are not in a distinct opposition to one another in the sense that the result of one power might negate that of the other. The two powers express the same power of substance, but do so differently. Their difference has to do with the allocation of the causal determination.

When we act, we understand ourselves to be the cause of what happens, i.e., we recognize our radical embeddedness in the order of things and affirm it. Here we have the realization that all changes are one when considered from the point of view of the power that makes them possible. When we undergo the actions of external causes, our thinking becomes confused and we start to believe that the cause in question acts, as it were, of its own accord. It is as if it acquires a reality of its own. The confusion in our thinking introduces a false separation into nature, for we believe that the external cause has an independent power, the power that cannot be ‘folded back’ into the infinite power that is one.

We get a sense of the ‘life’ of adequate and inadequate ideas alike in the illuminating discussion in Hasana Sharp’s essay “The Force of Ideas in Spinoza.” We read that a *mens*, which thus far has been rendered ‘mind,’ should be understood as a “radically dependent singular thing, an idea composed of many ideas, which desires to persevere in being.”<sup>101</sup> It can only persevere in being and increase its power by

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., Axiom.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., Proposition 3.

<sup>101</sup> Hasana Sharp, “The Force of Ideas in Spinoza,” in *Political Theory*, Vol. 35, No. 6,



interacting with ‘ambient’ ideas. Thus seen, the proper essence of the individual mind (i.e., that which defines the singularity of a given mind) is fairly limited inasmuch as it is necessarily accompanied by what Sharp calls “the accumulation of haphazard and deliberate encounters with other ideas.”<sup>102</sup> This is to say that the ideas that become forceful and powerful in the mind, that gain affective control over it, have little to do with the strivings of a given mind. The force of ideas jolts the mind. Thus, “they are not necessarily the truest ideas, but the ideas with the most life support, as it were, from fellow ideas.”<sup>103</sup> Much like bodies, ideas are enhanced by favorable encounters with similar ideas and diminished by the influence of the ideas contrary to them. As Spinoza puts it, “nothing positive that a false idea has is removed by the presence of what is true in so far as it is true.”<sup>104</sup> The fact that an idea is true does not add anything to its power. Strikingly, “there is no force proper to truth *qua* truth.”<sup>105</sup> The mind does not attract true ideas any more than it does the false ones. True ideas do not “exert themselves upon subjectivities any more forcefully than absurdities, unless there is a constellation of other similarly true ideas to nourish and sustain them.”<sup>106</sup> Only when ideas ‘join forces,’ so to speak, do they properly set in the mind, i.e., become a stable part of it.

However, it is important to know that the force of ideas has much deeper roots. Descartes, to whom Spinoza was intellectually indebted, famously asked, in our words, “How do we know that what we take to be real is indeed so?” Perhaps he was the first

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 1.

<sup>105</sup> Sharp, “The Force of Ideas in Spinoza,” *Political Theory*, 745.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Western philosopher, like its Asian counterpart, Zhuangzi, who took the phenomenon of dream seriously. “In a deliriously paranoid opening that includes visions of the mad and the seeming indistinguishability of dreams and reality,” Descartes comments on the untrustworthiness of waking experience,

As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep... Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars—that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands—are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, Descartes subjected everything, including the evidence of his own senses and his beliefs, to radical doubt, in the hope to affirm something reality-like. After being lost in his thoughts, shut alone in a room, Descartes concluded that the idea of God as absolute perfection is the only idea that his mind cannot be the author of. This is the birth of the famous Cartesian *cogito*, which can be defined as “the first-hand experience of thinking.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, “the *cogito* is, nonetheless, a crucial orientating principle in terms of modernity: rather than looking to the heavens or some external authority to guide us, we turn to the thoughts, feelings and introspection of the individual.”<sup>109</sup>

This confirmed, Descartes believed, the existence of benevolent God and, thus, reality, since if God *could* make things real rather than possible, he would have done so out of his perfect freedom. It is “the delirium of thought that threatened in the *Meditations*, where the world appeared bathed in a dazzling light haunted by demons, angels and spectres of dreams and madness, is filtered through the *cogito*, the idea of God

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<sup>107</sup> Descartes (13: *Meditations* 1.20). See R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy (with Selections from the Objections and Replies)*, tr. J. Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>108</sup> Pethick, *Affectivity and Philosophy After Spinoza and Nietzsche*, 22.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

and various representations that trap and tame thought.”<sup>110</sup> The power of this divine principle became the center around which other ideas orbited.

While Spinoza inherited and took seriously the thought that ideas can be fragile, forceful, striking, quiet, or light as a feather,<sup>111</sup> it is worth noting that he saw ideas are far more laden with affectivity than the Cartesian philosopher.<sup>112</sup> This is the reason he considered belief to be part and parcel of an idea. Both have an affective claim on us and both ‘stick.’ The idea of a winged horse and the belief that the sky is covered with a thick coat of vibrant blue paint to conceal the demons lurking behind it both have their forceful intensities, unless they are replaced with more powerful ideas and beliefs. Thus, “the most important aspect of Spinoza’s refusal to accept that belief lies external to ideas is thus his insistence on the impossibility of getting beyond the affective relations that are always at play in experience.”<sup>113</sup> It is also worth noting that affects, encompassing ideas and beliefs are durational and colored with affectivity, since an idea can haunt us and a feeling can gnaw at us.

As Pethick puts it,

ideas have a certain intensity that is only ever experienced in a web of relations that either reinforce or dissipate each other. Ideas are thus challenged and replaced by more forceful ones for Spinoza, and this inevitably involves an affective dimension to mental activity. It is not, therefore, a question of whether or not the correct mental picture of a thing is being operated with, but rather one of the activity or passivity of the mental processes in operation: are we stuck with

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the ‘affective turn’ of, roughly, the 1990s, could be construed as dating back three hundred years. It has, as a matter of fact, been recognized in Gregory Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shivers,” ed. Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>113</sup> Pethick, *Affectivity and Philosophy After Spinoza and Nietzsche*, 39.

the images of things that affect us, or are there some ideas that can displace the force of these images?<sup>114</sup>

Spinoza's supposition of the power of affects, beliefs, and ideas is unparalleled when we consider his commitment to eternal substance. It is as if he is pushing the notion of eternity to its breaking point, conceptually stretching and molding it until it begins to encompass that which threatens to undo it and until it begins to fissure, if only a little bit.

Refining the nature of affectivity,

the first thing to note is that affectivity is not strictly identifiable with passion and should certainly not be confused with psychological or emotional states... Affectivity has rather more to do with the experience of 'transience' in the very precise etymological sense of a 'going-over' or 'passing away' Experience is never of static images, but rather always involves durational processes of 'going' and 'passing away' that betray a productive relationality rather than a field of interacting entities, and the transformations that this involves are not just cognised but felt as either joy or sadness...<sup>115</sup>

Just like affects are duration, the body itself is defined as "a durational integrity."<sup>116</sup> The body is animated by time understood as transience, just like it is our bodily intensity is open to the intensities of ideas, affects, beliefs, and other bodies. It can be impacted for the better or for the worse. Thus, it would be incorrect to say that the body precedes affects and then accumulates them. Rather,

a body is called such-and-such a thing because of a certain durational integrity that is experienced amongst affective relations. The body can thus be considered as the *site* of affectivity but not a ground, for it is the transience and relationality of the bodily that is pivotal here, rather than some kind of static substance... the body as transitional or as the site of affectivity is always-already affective and durational. The body should not be considered as a mere thing that undergoes various events therefore, but as the very site of events, as 'evental.' This is precisely Spinoza's point in his attempt to rethink the bodily in terms of the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 39.

immanence of affectivity and the body as the site of the transient and durational continuity of certain affective relations.<sup>117</sup>

In an unexpected theoretical twist, Spinoza gave an affective dimension to ideas and he forever conjoined an affect, mental activity, embodiment and time. What does this mean for us and our question under discussion? Simply put, “for a supposed rationalist, there has probably never been a philosopher more interested and one who put more value in bodily experience than Spinoza.”<sup>118</sup> More precisely, however, is that while the idea of eternity is adequate (“adequate ideas occur when an idea is affirmed by a reflexive thinking”<sup>119</sup>) and the idea of duration or time is not, this now beside the point. Since time as transience is tied to affects, chances are that we will be affected by time much more often than by eternity. Indeed, the body as such is the duration of various affectivities, a timepiece gone insane.

We therefore learn that *both* adequate and inadequate ideas have their own affective claws that they sink into us, such that even the recognition of the falsity of erroneous ideas does not mean the erasure of their reality.<sup>120</sup> Thus, *the ideas or passions of time have as much force as the ideas that are indicative of eternity.*<sup>121</sup> What this means

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 40-41

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>120</sup> While reason itself plays an important role in either reinforcing or weakening the affective force of ideas, this goes beyond the scope of my discussion. What's key here is that reason does not cancel out the reality of affects. Rather, it helps us change our perspective on them. See Pethick, *Affectivity and Philosophy after Spinoza and Nietzsche*, 36.

<sup>121</sup> This interpretation goes against Della Rocca who argues that Spinoza holds extremely rationalist versions of the view that emotions are inherently rational and of the view that they are somehow inferior to reason.” Michael Della Rocca, “Rationalism run amok: representation and the reality of emotions in Spinoza,” in Charles Huenemann, *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.

is that such ideas or passions is their intimate proximity to change and contingency, with a seemingly arbitrary transition from presence to absence and vice versa. In other words, it is not the idea of numerical sequentiality that takes hold of us and that was the subject of Spinoza's critique to begin with, but rather the experience of change *qua* temporality as such, the change that springs, as it were, out of nowhere.

In this sense, the alignment of duration with passions appears to cast the phenomenon of time in a different light: if the affect of time is dependent on the condensation or intensification of force (i.e., on the condensation that, in its turn, is dependent on the chance encounters with ambient ideas), time itself attains both an affinity to and difference from power or force. The affinity in question means that time is now subject to intensification or diminishment, just as it is the nature of affects to oscillate and to make a joy turn to ashes, like those of Beckett's fragile dead bees, which also means that some affects increase the body's power and some lessen it, that some affects intensify one's experience and some impoverish it.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, we see that there is no simple synthesis of time that would give the selfsame, homogenous form to our experiences or could be universalized on the basis of it, since time *qua* force is radically fluid and instable. The difference here is that power enjoys a certain priority over the passion of time insofar as it is the power itself that leads us to align ourselves with either the inadequate ideas of time or the adequate ideas of eternity, yet the way in which one idea 'claims' us over competing others both forever open and irreducibly

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<sup>122</sup> "By emotion [*affectus*] I understand the affections of the body by which the body's power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections." Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Definition 3.

singular. The paths of seeing with cognitive clarity or seeing through a glass darkly lead to the same oceanic depth of force.

In this final section, I would like to expand on the question of why the idea of time is not eradicated when considered under a species of eternity [*sub specie aeternitatis*]. It is only after we establish the impossibility of subsuming the idea of time under that of eternity ‘in the last instance’ (i.e., in the infinite divine intellect) that we can speak of time’s irreducible difference and reality. According to Spinoza, in God, “there necessarily exists an idea which expresses the essence of this or that human body under a species of eternity.”<sup>123</sup> Thus, everything can be *seen* through the lens of eternity. Furthermore, “whatever the mind understands under a species of eternity, it understands not from the fact that it conceives the present actual existence of the body, but from the fact that it conceives the essence of the body under a species of eternity.”<sup>124</sup> Here Spinoza seems to be claiming that it is only by viewing each single thing through the prism of eternity that we finally discover its true essence, which is its necessary dependence on the substance.

Let us, however, recall that “God’s power of thinking is the equal of his actual power of doing.”<sup>125</sup> The power of thinking and the power of acting are one and the same. This means that “whatever follows formally from the infinite nature of God follows objectively in God from the idea of God, in the same order and with the same connection.”<sup>126</sup> In other words, every affect and the idea of that affect is contained in the infinite nature of God. Spinoza goes on to say that “the ideas of particular things, i.e., of

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., Part V, Proposition 22.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., Proposition 29.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., Part II, Corollary to Proposition 7.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

modes, that do not exist must be included in the infinite idea of God in the same way as the formal essences of particular things, i.e., of modes, are contained in the attributes of God.”<sup>127</sup> For instance, a sculpture does not exist until the sculptor creates it, but the *idea* of that sculpture could be deduced from the infinite idea of God.<sup>128</sup>

But is this not saying that there is a kind of secondary being of ideas, being as a possibility, in God’s essence, the being that has little import on the actually existing things? Do we not understand the infinite idea of God as a ‘storehouse’ that contains all things, some of which become actualized and some do not? Such a reading would be perfectly warranted if it were not for Spinoza’s adamant insistence on God’s full actuality and the real connection between the attributes. Recall that the divine power is absolute in its expressivity and its absoluteness excludes once and for all the suspicion that something might remain merely possible. This means that there is not a single thing or idea contained in God that is not actual, including affects, durations, and intensities. As we saw earlier, we do not look beyond affects, ideas, and intensities to discover the hidden truths existing in a strict ontological separation. All ideas are necessarily affirmative and cannot be compared to ‘empty’ images because these ideas are the effects that an external thing exerts on one’s eye, body, and brain.<sup>129</sup> *Any idea thus indexes a real force behind it. Similarly, the idea of passionate time, speaking in the language of affects, exercises a real force on us.*

I thus submit that Spinoza’s commitment to absolute actuality disabuses us of the idea that the affects or passions of time are less real or dissolve without a trace into all

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., Proposition 8.

<sup>128</sup> This example that Spinoza gives us elsewhere is cited in François Zourabichvili, *Spinoza: Une physique de la pensée* (Paris: PUF, 2002), 118.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 123.



other ideas in God's infinite intellect. *The affect of time never becomes other than itself, neither inside or outside the divine nature. To consider the idea of time under a species of eternity is then not to de-temporalize it, but rather to consider it as part of the dynamically infinite act of God and to translate it into actuality. More precisely, inserting the passion of time into its proper connectedness with everything else amounts not to the annihilation of time, but to its affirmation in the order of things and in the force it exerts on our bodies.* The immanent version of eternity that is synonymous with the infinite expressivity of God and that ensures, to speak fast and loose, that the divine power does not 'dry up' in the course of time, but rather establishes its ontological solidity and paradoxically affirms the very existence of its opposite, i.e., time as the in-between the bodies.

### **Excursus**

In light of the unfaltering actuality, how are we to understand the a-temporal or the eternal that takes place within our experience? What are the moments of the eternal injected into the interweaving of our experiences and passions? I will first take my cue from Merleau-Ponty and then venture my own suggestion, tying together, however tentatively, the experience of the eternal and suffering. My discussion will be brief for the simple reason that I do not see the notion of eternity as a useful tool to minimize suffering and thus relevant in terms of this work, yet this is not to deny that eternity seeps through our experience it now and then.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that the experience of eternity is tantamount to our experience of objectivity as such.<sup>130</sup> When we encounter a table, we do not in fact see *all* of its sides and aspects, and yet we *see* the table intuitively, as if from the bird's-eye perspective. Here the eternal becomes synonymous with the unconditioned, the given that exists independently from all our imaginings and doings. The experiential error, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that we forget that the eternally given still arises from out of our experience.<sup>131</sup>

If the eternal is neither duration that simply lasts a very long time nor is it reducible to mathematical truths, but the lived experience of something radically other than human, I want to suggest that the most visceral form the eternal assumes is that of blind chance, a senseless tragedy, a brute fatality, or an upsurge of the elements. As Neiman writes, "earthquakes and volcanoes, famines and floods inhabit the borders of human meaning."<sup>132</sup> The 1755 earthquake of Lisbon exemplified blind ruination that fully revealed the gaping abyss between the human and the non-human world. The lightning strike reducing a body to ashes in the split of a second would be another example of the inexplicable and the senseless here. In Neiman's words,

The random force of lightning is part of what made it a fitting symbol of divine power. Given the appropriate worldview, the sense that earthquakes are thoroughly inexplicable could increase the sense of mystery that furthers awe and

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<sup>130</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2005), 36.

<sup>131</sup> "We had to frequent the phenomenal field and become acquainted, through psychological descriptions, with the subject of phenomena, if we were to avoid placing ourselves from the start, as does reflexive philosophy, in a transcendental dimension assumed to be eternally given, thus by-passing the full problem of constitution." *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>132</sup> Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3.

wonder. Our lack of understanding of why the gods strike can be one more sign of the distance between human and divine that moves some souls to reverence.<sup>133</sup>

Occurrences like natural disasters, sudden death in the bloom of one's life, and terminal illnesses, to name but a few, can all be subsumed under the category of blind chance. It is so devoid of meaning that many people do in fact turn to the divine in an attempt to find at least some semblance of sense in the other world, when the world that we know fails to offer us any. When the lightning strikes, we are tempted to conclude that the sky itself decided to smite someone down or that it was the glint of an immense heavenly sword that came to life.

I thus submit that it is the experience of blind chance and the suffering it creates that could be understood as a deadly glimpse of the eternal.<sup>134</sup> To be sure, this is not the shining eternity of the first cause. This is the eternity of the abyss suddenly—and always suddenly—opening under our feet. This is the eternity that is truly lived and experienced in the victim's futile question, 'Why me?'

Allow me to end this digression on a personal note. As I was lying on the grass, in the nearby park, in the summer of 2015, I was thinking, incessantly and unbearably, about my then-fiancé's late-stage cancer. The news of his diagnosis was profoundly sudden and shattering. Every 'What if?' ('What if we'd have caught it earlier?') crashed against the merciless rock of givenness. We didn't. We couldn't. I lay on the grass, with the numbing taste of the blind chance in the form of eternity on my tongue, the eternity of

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>134</sup> Needless to say, the interpretation I have advanced differs radically from Negri's argument that eternity and becoming-eternal are inseparable. While change is at least marginally injected into the blind chance I have talked about, the emphasis here remains on the non-human in the form of suddenness, like that lightning strike. See Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004), 109.

the unanticipated and the senseless, the eternally non-human. The sky—so blue that it wasn't blue anymore—and eternity became one as they pierced, like invisible, sky-borne needles, the experiential fabric of my life with the archaically non-human. In the face of the eternal, I sobbed like a mortally wounded animal.

To continue after our interlude, it seems to me that to consider time and eternity with respect to force is to begin to examine the role both of them play in the individuation of both the mind and the body as well as in the composition and unfolding of experience. This reasoning allows us to avoid distributing or allocating the temporal and the a-temporal in advance, which would dictate in advance the nature and form of our experiences. To put this into the language of the overarching problematic in this work, it is possible to say that what we experience as the unbearable duration of suffering or what we experience as joy or even simple everyday forgetfulness, such that the flow of time itself becomes imperceptible, is not pre-determined.<sup>135</sup> This is the case when affective durations have the final say when it comes to the tissue of our experience and that the experience of intensive passages and thresholds is itself open to change and bears a genuine significance on the vicissitudes of our bodies and minds.

What this allows us to do is to conceive of time and eternity as a kind of 'lines of force' (here the forces of pleasure or suffering) that thought would have to enter into a dynamic relation with and become living, fluid, and individuating, locked in an experiential back-and-forth or an intensive loop of thinking, the body, and passions of time. To reiterate, thus understood, time and eternity are not the pre-given forms or

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<sup>135</sup> While this exceeds the limits of this project, it is worth asking if the Spinozist eternity could be understood as a kind of disappearance of the experience of time at the height of ever-so-brief joy and tranquility.

hierarchically organized abstract categories, but rather real experiences affecting our bodies. In short, to live in the world is to undergo the passions of time, seen as the force of affects and ideas.

Thus, the notion of *affective temporality* means that, in the vision of radical immanence or in-worldliness, time is no longer seen as a ‘mere’ illusion to be dispelled by the human reason at its clearest. Temporality is given *to us*, in the dative, as an affect or passion, in the infinite multitude of intensities and durations, to the point where we no longer need the category of the dative case to make sense of this, since the ‘itself’ or essence of time in its maddening plurality resides in our eyes, lips, and bones. Indeed, it is what makes us beam with joy, what makes us quiver with delight, what makes our body contract and withdraw from the world in pain, from what stings, overwhelms, and floods. It is also that which splinters into innumerable modalities, i.e., affective intensities, since every affect leaves a unique imprint on our body or, more precisely, it animates our body differently. Furthermore, the temporality in question rises and falls, it swells and flickers, it gathers itself into uncanny stillness and shivers, in all of its incalculable intensities, as malleable, volatile, and fluid as the fabric of our experience itself.

If we recall that the work in question is dedicated to the phenomenon of suffering as a type of evil, it is precisely the passion of suffering that interests us here. If pain, as it were, sneaks into Spinoza’s thinking and becomes intelligible to us *as* affective and durational time, *as* the time of suffering, I would like to turn to the exploration of whether time-as-pain truly fits in with the Spinozist terms and his insistence on both eternity and plenitude, i.e., the necessary self-containment of everything that is. Which is to say that I

would like to examine if affective temporality, considered under the rubric of the experience of suffering, is, in the last instance, at home in Spinoza's work.

The central question is now, How can we account for the existence of evil and suffering in Spinoza's system of univocity and ontological plenitude? Is the existence of evil nothing other than a part of the *necessary self-containment* that can never be eliminated? Does Spinoza's provocatively anomalous philosophical system ultimately turn evil and suffering into necessity? To begin with, I will outline his understanding of evil and then suggest the reasons why it is important to leave the Spinozist terrain, while holding on to our discovery of affective temporality, in order to approach the question of evil from the vantage point of reducing it.

Let us address the first question from Spinoza's perspective. Indeed,

Nothing at all is either good or evil, from the perspective of God or the natural world. Instead, he argues, good and evil are merely words that humans employ to label things we find pleasant or unpleasant, desirable or undesirable. We only ascribe intrinsic goodness or evil to things because we falsely believe the world to have been created for our benefit.<sup>136</sup>

We are thus responsible, at least in part, for creating and utilizing concepts like 'good' and 'evil.' Upon this reading, the concepts in question are in fact indispensable to our existence insofar as they help gain clarity and better understanding about what benefits us and what harms us. These concepts are the theoretical tools by which we navigate the world.

However, as Marshall argues, "he is not a simple subjectivist, taking good and evil to be whatever anyone happens to like or dislike, because, he argues, human beings

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<sup>136</sup> Eugene Marshall, "Baruch Spinoza on Evil," 1, Publication forthcoming, accessed on 12/14/2016, [https://www.academia.edu/4379554/Spinoza\\_on\\_Evil](https://www.academia.edu/4379554/Spinoza_on_Evil)

have a real and fixed nature that determines our good.”<sup>137</sup> In other words, the things that harm human beings have a consistency and patterns, such that the variation in what is experienced as harmful is not endless. The same holds true for what we consider good. More precisely, evil is a *type of activity*, i.e., it is what prevents us from living a life guided by reason.

Furthermore, human beings need to be part of the right kind of society so as to lead a flourishing life, which means that the ideas of good and evil not only aid us in navigating the world, but have a role to play in the creation of society. Thus, any disruption of the ‘right’ social whole is also rightly seen as evil. Spinoza thus conjoins these terms with the notion of utility,

Spinoza denies the objective reality of good and evil but argues for the usefulness of retaining the words to identify what is beneficial or a hindrance to our living a life guided by reason, which can only occur in a well-ordered society. Thus, evil is nothing intrinsically real in things, but we can still use the term to describe what helps us to live rationally with others.<sup>138</sup>

The Spinozist argument as to why good and evil are not truly real should be familiar to us by now. They are human constructs, used to explain what delights and what harms us, since affects themselves are neither good nor bad. In his own words,

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>139</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 4, Preface.

The concepts of good and evil are thus useful for comparing, judging, and discerning things. To take his example of music seriously, we can conclude that what we are comparing are not intrinsic qualities of things or their essences, but rather the different effects they have on different people. These effects can turn out to be either positive or negative, depending on the physical and emotional capacities of the person in question. Soothing music can make the already-depressed person plunge even deeper into despair, while it can have a calming effect on someone who is too agitated. In short, the encounter or relation between sorrowful music and the mourner produces a negative affect. In other words, it is the very relation or encounter between a phenomenon and the human being that gives rise to these categories. With regard to affects, we can say that they are good or bad only from the standpoint of their impact.

Put otherwise, “*there are always relations that agree with one another....* But relations that agree, according to the natural order, do not necessarily coincide with the preservation of a particular relation, which may be dissolved, that is, cease to be realized. In this sense there is no evil (in itself), but there is that which is bad (for me)...”<sup>140</sup> Thus, the sense of badness that Spinoza is holding on to, in lieu of the notion of evil, has to do with co-mingling of relations, constellations of things and bodies, and an array of fluctuations and intensive impacts.

Taking a step back and viewing Spinoza’s thinking of the universe as a whole, we could say that his rejection of the categories ‘good’ and ‘evil’ *as woven into the fabric of reality or as ontologically non-ephemeral* stems from his rejection of teleology, i.e., the false, yet admittedly tempting idea that the universe, to put it bluntly, cares about human

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<sup>140</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 33.



happiness. To recall and to cite Marshall once again, a purpose-free universe amounts to the view that “there is exactly one thing, or substance, in existence and everything else is a mode of that one substance.”<sup>141</sup> In a universe without any final purpose, our human understanding of good and evil does not in fact reflect any intrinsic features of Spinoza’s cosmology.

Taken as a human construct, evil (admittedly, the notion of good will plays hardly no part in what follows<sup>142</sup>) can still be seen as something to be avoided, precisely because of its power to bring harm to our bodies. First of all, this avoidance is central to my own flourishing. In Spinoza’s words, “since virtue.... is simply acting from the laws of one’s own nature, and since no one.... endeavours to preserve his being except from the laws of his own nature, from this it follows, first, that the basis of virtue is the endeavour to preserve one’s own being and that happiness consists in the fact that a man is able to preserve his being.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, the desire to persevere is wired into our very being.

Nevertheless, virtue, understood as avoidance of what’s harmful and the pursuit of what’s good for us is something that is common to all of us.<sup>144</sup> Indeed,

this commonality of virtue is a necessary consequence of the nature of reason. Reason is the ability to conceive of universal notions from common notions of the properties of things. Virtue, as acting under the guidance of reason, can be common to all because reason itself is a property common to humans. Moreover, by exercising reason, humans come to understand that virtue is something in which all human beings can participate.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Marshall, “Baruch Spinoza on Evil,” Publication forthcoming, 5.

<sup>142</sup> “Good neither adds nor subtracts in moral matter. We have no interest in Good, whether it is understood as happiness or as what gives happiness its value and weight, just as it gives value to any other entity....” Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), pp. 438-39.

<sup>143</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Scholium.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> J. Curran O’Day, *Finding Room for Altruism in Baruch Spinoza’s Ethics*, accessed on 01/14/2017, <https://philosophy.kent.edu/philconf/sites/default/files/201115.pdf>

Avoiding evil is thus common to all, and, seen under the rubric Spinoza's immanence, no individual exists in isolation. Living in the right kind of society and wishing for the other's flourishing are fully consistent with his logic of plenitude. In O'Day's words, "virtue, therefore, can include the desire for another's benefit. Moreover, the fact that human beings do not always live virtuously, that is, from the guidance of reason, makes the principle of harmonious living even more crucial to one's survival."<sup>146</sup> The care for the other is thus embedded in our own striving for happiness.

It is, however, the *necessary* nature of the idea of evil (recall that everything that *can* be actual, *is* actual) that makes its thinking highly problematic on Spinozist terms. Indeed, the notion of evil as the opposite of necessity and human creation or production will prove to be key to the project in question. The issue lies in the closed system of the Spinozist immanence. As Ophir puts it,

evil, which is perceived from the point of view of the totality that is *causa sui*, disappears, for within this totality all is both necessary and justified, nothing is superfluous. The individual who understands this necessity in full—that is, in its totality—and who views himself from the point of view of the necessity, of the whole, has no reason to lament or feel sorrow. For him, from now on, good and evil will be affections of attraction to and repulsion at what is useful for, or harmful to, his subsistence and persistence as a distinct entity. Evils are the result of an individual's aberrant attitude to an object that lessens his strength and causes him to aspire to (or generate) that which will harm him. The suffering involved in his revulsion will of course remain; only its superfluity will disappear. It will reappear only when the individual, at a weak moment, is tempted to compare the world as it is with the world as it seemingly should have been. But speaking of what should have been the case, in opposition to what is, means rejecting the totality of what is as it exists, and this is an idle attempt, for totality is necessary.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>147</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 310.

What Ophir is telling us here is that the experience of suffering is pitted *not* simply against the human-made nature of evil,<sup>148</sup> which would not subtract anything from its reality, but rather the necessity to affirm it as part of Spinoza's totality, the totality in which absolutely nothing is superfluous. To be sure, suffering does remain, as do the pangs of hunger and the acute pain of injury. However, the enlightened mind will have no choice but to acknowledge that the suffering in question is under the yoke of necessity telling us that the totality of which it is a necessary part must be embraced and affirmed.<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, being itself stands higher than the ideas of good and evil.<sup>150</sup> In short, it is precisely the superfluity of suffering that remains unintelligible in Spinoza's immanent universe where nothing can be otherwise.<sup>151</sup> We can be mistaken about the source or cause of our pain, but the pain itself endures in the actuality of what is.

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<sup>148</sup> This is hardly a possibility in Spinoza as well, since all human ideas are contained within the divine substance.

<sup>149</sup> Since Spinoza's obvious goal is to outline an ethics, as my colleague Gil Morejon put it, his point is essentially therapeutic. That is, "if someone does something you don't like, notice that you can either say: they did that freely, they chose to do that. Or, you can say: they were determined to do that, they did not choose any part of it, it is just what happened as a matter of necessity. If you believe the former, you will be much more affected than if you accept the latter. It is much harder to get angry at someone when you think they just were determined to do what they did. It's much easier to get angry at them if you imagine that they are pure and simple free to choose their actions, and that given this freedom they chose to do something that hurt you." As an aside, I admit that I am much more affected when someone who hurt me chalks up their actions either to cosmological necessity or the oppressive political system. So much for Spinoza's therapeutic efforts.

<sup>150</sup> To be sure, "the great rationalist theory according to which evil is nothing is doubtless a commonplace of the seventeenth century..." Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 31.

<sup>151</sup> Badiou takes a somewhat similar issue with the unbridled necessity of plenitude when he writes, "it is clear that this is the philosophy par excellence which *forecloses the void*." Furthermore, "everything that belongs is included and everything that is included belongs." Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005), 113-14.

Yet, it is precisely ‘the being otherwise’ that we must articulate and defend in our efforts to wedge a gap between suffering and necessity. Simply put, evil and affirmation or justification must part ways. If we are at the end of theodicy, i.e., the vindication of divine goodness in view of the existence of evil and suffering, using any absolute principle as a way of justifying the existence of evil becomes both untenable and *antimoral*. Let me refer to Emmanuel Levinas just for a moment, since his words on the failure of theodicy are particularly potent. “This is the century,” Levinas tells us, “that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia.” The monstrous atrocities we have seen abolish the language of justifications. It is precisely the event of Auschwitz that announces the end of all theodicy, since “the disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity.”<sup>152</sup> After Auschwitz, to justify suffering by referencing any kind of divine design itself becomes an obscenity. In addition to the moral taboo placed on seeking justifications of evil vis-à-vis the divine, we note that “antitheodicy,” much in tandem with Ophir’s commitment to the world in its immanence, “emphasizes responding to evil as opposed to theorizing about why it exists.”<sup>153</sup>

While we cannot minimize suffering under the sign of necessity, I would still like to emphasize that the phenomenon of affective temporality has both a reality of its own and an ineliminable force, since it is not pitted against clock time or chronological

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<sup>152</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *Entre-Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (London: Athlone, 2000), 91.

<sup>153</sup> T. M. Rudavsky, “A Brief History of Skeptical Responses to Evil,” eds. Justin P. McBrayer, and Daniel Howard-Snyder, *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 319.

succession. Rather, it rises up against eternity itself and emerges triumphant, i.e., not lessened in or ashamed of its affective power. Which means that the time of suffering is also real, bodily, and malleable, like an eerily shimmering clay. As Deleuze confirms, “In sadness there is something irreducible, something that is neither negative nor extrinsic: a passage that is experienced and is real. *A duration*. [...] There is sadness as a diminution of the power of acting or of the capacity for being affected, a sadness that is manifested in the despair of the unfortunate....”<sup>154</sup>

However, while the duration of human torment can indeed be replaced with other, stronger affectivities, we are unable to truly revolt in the face of suffering, since this would require the abolishment of the category of necessity or at least significantly lessening its grip. However, Spinoza’s entire philosophy, for better or worse, is one of the primacy of necessity, with affects, bodies, and temporalities nesting both alongside it and within one another, meaning that dis-affirming human agony by refusing its necessity is an impossibility within his theoretical coordinates.

Which is to say, even though we *could* defend the reality of affective temporality and the force of the idea of evil in Spinoza, he remains a philosopher paradoxically committed *both* to the necessity of the divine cause, *causa sui*, and the power of affects and human experience, to the point where his “cognition remains suffused with affectivity.”<sup>155</sup> Given the therapeutic thrust of Spinoza’s ethics, the only thing we can say with any certainty is that he believes that *knowing* the necessity and the true cause of, say, one’s deep sorrow is meant to lessen it. In other words, we can *relate* to or interpret our

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<sup>154</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 39.

<sup>155</sup> V. M. Foti, “Thought, Affect, Drive and Pathogenesis in Spinoza and Freud,” *History of European Ideas*, 3:2, pp. 221-236.

or an other's suffering differently, but we are powerless in the face of its phenomenon. As Ophir succinctly puts it, "the one who cries for help.... is interested in relief, not interpretation."<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, we can affirm the intensity of ideas, but we cannot simply do away with Spinoza's heartfelt embrace of necessity and eternity, which is *the* issue concerning the question of evil.

While both joys and sorrows, just like all other affects, are both necessary and real for Spinoza, I want to conclude this chapter by submitting that it is the passion itself that corrodes the alleged necessity of suffering. It is what 'contaminates' and ruptures from within the system of total necessity because to experience suffering is to experience its deeply meaningless superfluity. The suggestion I want to put forth here is that the 'This is enough!' of suffering shapes our experience in such a way that we are compelled to admit an affective fracture in the Spinozist totality. That is, "I would like to tell you that having passions does not mean living beautifully, but rather suffering pointlessly."<sup>157</sup> The experience and the force of the superfluity of suffering rises in revolt against the force of necessity. Indeed, "the suffering, or rather an act of suffering, is revealed as that liminal action which is already setting itself up in opposition to fate."<sup>158</sup> If the pesky passions of time persist even under the sign of eternity, now the fault-lines or the first signs of the fissuring of totality are becoming increasingly visible. In short, the passion of suffering makes visible its superfluity.

In transitioning to examining the question of evil, affects, and time from a very different, contemporary perspective, I admit that I feel a twinge of regret, as I am parting

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<sup>156</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 265.

<sup>157</sup> Lispector, "Letters to Hermengardo," *The Complete Stories*. Kindle ed.

<sup>158</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 221.

ways with the philosopher who managed to sneak in embodiment as durational time and the force of affects and ideas right under the species of eternity.

## Chapter Two

### The Trajectory of Evil: From Privation to Superfluity

There's nothing beautiful about time. All clocks are ugly.

—Sadegh Hedayat

The central question of this chapter is best formulated by Forti, who asks, “What tools do we have at our disposal to understand that the scene of evil is a complex scene, where the power of nothingness and the death drive do not reign absolute at all?”<sup>159</sup> The task here is to advance the idea of evil as social production and distribution, characterized first and foremost by superfluity, as well as to articulate the role of affective temporality in this understanding. If evil is now seen as essentially man-made and socially distributed, this is the conceptual vocabulary I will apply to my later examination of present or ongoing suffering understood as a type of evil. In Vetlesen’s powerful words, “evil *as suffered* is not a product of our consciousness. Evil is concrete. Its presence in the world is experiential. What we know about evil, we know from experience. As experienced, evil has the form of suffering.”<sup>160</sup>

The first part will outline the traditional ways of construing the problem of evil, with a particular emphasis on Saint Augustine and evil as privation, i.e., his vision of evil as an act of the human will that strays from the divine goodness and on Hannah Arendt’s famous equation of evil with thoughtlessness, best articulated in her damning discussion

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<sup>159</sup> Simona Forti, *New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2014), 119.

<sup>160</sup> Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, 222.

of Adolf Eichmann. The second part will discuss Adi Ophir's contribution to the problem of evil, focusing on evil as production and the imperative to abolish or alleviate the ongoing production of "the things that make people suffer."<sup>161</sup> Having elucidated his account and the emphasis he places on the present in halting the production and distribution of evil, I will go on to discuss his notion of moral urgency. While this concept is first juxtaposed with the idea of deferral, I will conclude by deconstructing the apparent dichotomy between these two concepts, in an attempt to disabuse us of the idea that urgency is thoughtless, knee-jerk, and potentially dangerous. Indeed, I will demonstrate that acting under the sign of urgency has a very particular thinking, coupled with the activity of judgment, and that the thinking in question will have far-reaching consequences for disrupting ongoing evils, rethinking victimhood, and creating a new type of agency, the agency that aims at the creation of a world where victims are at home in the company of their fellow human beings.

In other words, as I will show throughout this dissertation, if evil is, first and foremost, a production, according to Ophir's key insight, and if suffering and its particular temporality is a type of produced and distributed evil, I will argue that, in suffering and in our efforts to halt its production, there emerges a specific type of agency. Just like the patterns of production and distribution of evil, this agency is to be studied, analyzed, and, above all, assumed and reinforced by practice. Indeed, the agency in question arises from gaining an understanding of the temporality of suffering and the experience of the victim, from disrupting the production of the victim's encounter with an unbearable excitation, i.e., suffering, and from cultivating the practices of this very

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<sup>161</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 14.



disruption. While all of this remains to be demonstrated, my bigger claim will be that without actively learning how to help the one suffering before you or next to you, without assuming the agency of someone who prioritizes the urgent relief from ongoing suffering, the ideal of helping multiple and fairly abstract others in the future is bound to remain, at best, illusory and empty or, at worst, irredeemably hypocritical. The subject that justifies their inattention to those suffering around them in order to alleviate the distress of more people later, in the darkness and obscurity of the future, has to be seen as an ethical oxymoron, akin to a true falsehood or love without care. To use another analogy, which can grasp the heart of the problem only in a limited manner, this ethical subject is like an intricate, magnificent edifice, emeralds and runes cascading down its splendid walls, yet an edifice fatally missing a foundation. Thus, I will submit that a viable ethical subject can emerge only from out of the practice and understanding of moral urgency in the face of someone's suffering. In other words, this subject, forged in the practical, finite efforts to help the person next to them, ought to be at the start of and underlie any and all future ethical endeavors of a more abstract, detached nature, i.e., the endeavors toward 'the greater good.'<sup>162</sup>

Let me begin by discussing the prominent idea of evil as privation or absence and as something that is attributed solely to the freedom of the human will, best exemplified

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<sup>162</sup> We note that, in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Baudrillard argues that since almost nothing was known about Iraqi deaths, this war left no experiential impact on us due to the fact that the closely watched media representations, fueled by the task of propaganda, defined our access to the reality of the war. If all war is, is a set of stylized, carefully chosen images, not only do we not have any chance of becoming the addressees of those affected by it, but we are barred from forming a judgment about it. If the existence of an entire war can be forced into crisis, the moral invisibility of one singular other in distress is a done deal. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

by the thought of Saint Augustine. As we will see, evil, while glaringly obvious in its many worldly manifestations, enjoys the questionable status of ephemeral deviation from the natural order of things, as created by the God of Christianity. Before I go any further, we might wonder if understanding evil as a kind of absence still exerts any kind of real influence in our contemporary world. While doing justice to this undoubtedly challenging question is the task for a different project, it seems to me that we often still do see evil as a surface phenomenon, as a blemish on human existence, as an unfortunate absence of the good, as evidenced by our undying readiness to come up with and have faith in various utopian visions. Taking this line of thinking further, I would suggest that utopias are possible only as long as we are not truly burdened by the immense, tangible weight of evils and torment in the world. Indeed, “a modern sensibility... regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime.”<sup>163</sup>

As may be familiar to all of us, Augustine understands God as absolute perfection or as the assemblage of all superlatively positive qualities. God is fully, absolutely complete in existence, power, wisdom, and goodness. Since God is coextensive with being, the latter is infused with goodness as well. Indeed, “the idea that Being is coextensive with the Good, thus relegating Evil to Non-Being, was introduced by Plato, as we know, and developed by Augustine.”<sup>164</sup> God is the highest principle to which everything in the world and above it owes its existence and it is the ultimate origin of every creature in the world. Similarly, it is a fairly clear-cut hierarchy or directionality where what is low is striving toward what is high, what is less beautiful is striving toward what is more beautiful, and what is good is striving toward what is better, nobler, more

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<sup>163</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (S.I.: Picador, 2017), 99.

<sup>164</sup> Forti, *New Demons*, 19.

perfect. Now, even in the face of the superlative divine goodness, “it is obvious to every observer that the world is full of evils: perversity and unpleasantness and disruptions of the natural order. How are these to be explained, if we believe that a divine Providence is watching over creation?”<sup>165</sup> This is, to be sure, a perennial question that must have driven many a theologian into despair: How can God in his infinite benevolence allow for the existence of evil on earth? If we say that evil is part of God’s absolute completeness and that he is responsible for the wretchedness of the world, this God-centered view admits that the divine goodness is lacking in goodness. Moreover, it introduces a contradiction into the divine essence, which complicates the matter even further. This is something we saw in our explication of Spinoza’s thinking. If God *is* and *isn’t* good, there is now a clear rift at the heart of his very existence, the rift that indicates that the divine existence is conflicted or marred. As if this were not enough, “if you assumed that a thing was made good merely by God’s willing it, and evil, or not good, by his not willing it, you were debarred from reasoning at all about the implications of the attribute of goodness.”<sup>166</sup> Since we cannot comprehend the greatness and the ways of God, speculating about the nature of good and evil is equally futile, condemning us to moral silence.

If we choose a man-centered view in order to explain evil, i.e., the view where evil is attributed not to God, but to human beings themselves, the human beings who commit acts of evil, we need to demonstrate how man can be free enough to exert his own, independent will and commit evil acts of his own accord, thus becoming removed

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<sup>165</sup> G.R Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 91.

<sup>166</sup> Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 70.

from the divine source of his very life, and how he can still maintain an indissoluble connection with his creator. In other words, we need to account for the freedom of the human being without completely severing his or her necessary relation and subordination to God. We need to explain how the capacity for wrong-doing is autonomous, while human beings owe their existence to God.

It is the latter view that Augustine takes up as his lifelong challenge. In writing his book *Confessions*, he looked deeply and honestly into his own experience of evil, both as its perpetrator and as a rigorous thinker observing the ways in which evil presents itself in the world. As Siobhan Nash-Marshall points out, there is something truly contradictory about our relation to evil.<sup>167</sup> Indeed,

On the one hand, our intellectual horror before evil, our pain with respect to it, and our shock at its presence would indicate that evil is indeed something foreign to us.... Our incapacity truly to become accustomed to its presence would indicate that we do not have the capacity for evil. On the other hand, our capacity to do evil things and our vices show that evil is very much a part of ourselves and our lives. How can this be?<sup>168</sup>

This is the paradox that deeply troubled Augustine himself. Indeed, how can we recoil from the sight of evil *and* fall prey to evil and vices? We learn that he became dismayed once he started enjoying theater, since it meant deriving pleasure from the tragic events on stage that would otherwise revolt him in the real world. As he puts it,

Stage-plays also carried me away, full of images of my miseries, and of fuel to my fire. Why is it, that man desires to be made sad, beholding doleful and tragical things, which yet himself would no means suffer? Yet he desires as a spectator to feel sorrow at them, this very sorrow is his pleasure. What is this but a miserable madness? For a man is the more affected with these actions, the less free he is from such affections. Howsoever, when he suffers in his own person, it uses to be

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<sup>167</sup> Siobhan Nash-Marshall, "Free Will, Evil, and Saint Augustine," *Quaestiones Disputatae*, 2015.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

styled misery: when he compassionates others, then it is mercy. But what sort of compassion is this for feigned and scenical passions?<sup>169</sup>

How is he to make sense of the fact that he was striving to be a good person and a devout Christian and yet that he was enjoying seeing someone else's suffering? Where did this rift within him come from? The task is then to find a satisfactory explanation both for our abhorrence of evil and our propensity to delight in it, as though our very soul has been split into two parts locked in a mortal struggle with each other.

Another famous example of Augustine's own capacity for wickedness comes from the theft of some pears in his adolescence. Upon examining the real source of pleasure he felt as a result of this action, he admits that "my pleasure was not in those pears, it was in the offence itself..."<sup>170</sup> The purpose and the enjoyment of this petty crime did not stem from any hunger, any need for nourishment, and not even in relishing the sweet taste of the pears. Rather, it came from the 'fault' itself and the action had no other goal other than wickedness as such. Once again, Augustine is confronted by his abiding desire to be good and his enjoyment of wicked things.

The solution that Augustine proposed was twofold and he arrived at it only after his disillusionment with the doctrine of Manichaeism. To explicate his proposed solution, I will first discuss his argument that evil is a privation, i.e., that it has no existence of its own. I will then follow Augustine in locating the source of evil in the errors of the free human will. Before doing so, let us remind ourselves that Manichaeism, founded in the third century by the Persian prophet Mani, postulates the eternal struggle of the forces of good and evil, as if mirroring the conflict Augustine felt within himself. Since human

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<sup>169</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. Albert C. Outler (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

beings have both the capacity for good and the propensity for evil, there must indeed be two opposing principles governing us. As Evans puts it, “the Manichees did not attempt to avoid the problem of evil. Indeed, by finding a place for evil in the universe they made it a fundamental principle in their system.”<sup>171</sup> Opting for this doctrine meant believing that God himself was locked in the eternal battle against evil, rather than believing that man could be the agent of evil. While there are several problems with Manichaeism, as Augustine later began to recognize, I will point out only one of them. In attributing evil to an alien, fully existing force fully coequal with God, human beings essentially became exonerated of their own evil tendencies. The evil often found in the human heart was now seen as if it came from without, a fundamentally foreign element imposed on man. However, this view fails to account for the very complexities and moral contradictions of the soul that Augustine was attempting to come to terms with. In short, it cannot account for the experience of evil and for the pleasure human beings derive from it.

Augustine’s key objections to Manichaeism can be broken down into two parts.

According to Nash-Marshall,

The first is that in response to the Manicheans he points out that evil cannot be a positive thing or property. The second is that he points out that as a non-entity, a non-property, evil cannot be a primordial property... Instead, Augustine argues that evil is a privation that results from a choice of that which deprives a person of his true good.<sup>172</sup>

He thus rejects the idea that evil has the status of something primordial, i.e., that it is some fundamental principle contesting the primacy of the divine Providence, the principle that antecedes the world and its creations. Furthermore, Augustine submits that evil, as a non-entity, does not challenge the equation of existence with goodness at all. In

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<sup>171</sup> Evans, *Augustine on Evil*, 13.

<sup>172</sup> Nash-Marshall, “Free Will, Evil, and Saint Augustine,” *Quaestiones Disputatae*, 56.

his own words, “to Thee is nothing whatsoever evil: yea, not only to Thee, but also to Thy creation as a whole, because there is nothing without, which may break in, and corrupt that order which Thou hast appointed it.”<sup>173</sup> If we postulate that there is no gap between existence and divine goodness, that both come from God, that existence and goodness are one and the same, it necessarily follows that whatever evil we may find in the world is the ephemeral absence or lack of existence. It points to what *should* be, but isn’t. As Evans elucidates,

If all that exists is good, it follows that what is deprived of goodness is deprived of existence... Even corrupt things are good, for if there was nothing good in them, there would be nothing in them to be corrupted. If it were possible to deprive things of all goodness, they would no longer exist. Evil begins to look like a taking away, a privation, a tendency to nothingness, rather than a *locus inanis*, a pocket of nothingness in a good world.<sup>174</sup>

In other words, evil is understood as a kind of process or activity, the end-goal of which is dissolution or the conversion of being into nothingness. Perhaps we could say that it the decaying of existence or being, the decaying that, nevertheless, has nothing inevitable or natural about it, for it comes not from the natural order of the universe, but from human beings. As we are about to see, “Augustine located the source of evil in the rational will, which is free to choose between good and evil,”<sup>175</sup> which, in turn, means that evil is not any kind of substance, matter, or entity, but rather a misguided departure from the divine order of being. Indeed, according to the Catholic view, “evil is not an independent type of being but either a certain kind of activity on the part of a creature or

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<sup>173</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 56.

<sup>174</sup> Evans, *Augustine on Evil*, 38.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

God's just ruling of its perpetrator."<sup>176</sup> What is at stake here is thus not singling out a specific 'region' of existence that may be said to be the origin of evil or corruption (recall the equivalence of existence and goodness), but understanding the dynamic, malleable nature of the free will that is responsible for evil, all the while acknowledging that the *origin* of the human will still lies in the divine essence. Put otherwise, "to the degree that a being does exist and act, its reality derives from God. To the extent that it fails in being and falls short in operation is evil."<sup>177</sup> The origin of the will lies in God and our freedom comes from the divine essence, yet the subsequent vicissitudes of it are the work of the human beings.

We are beginning to see here that the question of the will is key to Augustine's response to the problem of evil. Let us briefly examine the way in which Augustine effectively drives the wedge between the superlative divine goodness and evil in the world by redirecting the question to the free choices human beings make. While no one is infinitely free the way God is, human beings still have the capacity to exercise their will freely. Indeed, "just as our minds can transcend the mere sensible world and rise to the contemplation of eternal truths, so too our wills can transcend the natural order and are able to resist all external influences."<sup>178</sup> Which is to say that we are not fully determined by external factors and circumstances, that we have the final say in the actions we commit to. This is a basic reinstatement of human responsibility, which, to be sure, remains a vital feature of contemporary ethics as well.

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<sup>176</sup> J. Patout Burns, "Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1988).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Peter King, "Introduction," in *Augustine: On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice and Other Writings*, Trans. Peter King, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xix.



As Augustine asks, attempting to get at the autonomy of the will, “What is so much in the power of the will as the will itself?”<sup>179</sup> In other words, unless we want to embrace the theoretically fatal risk of infinite regress, “there cannot be any prior cause or ground that determines the will in its free choices.... the freedom involved in free choice must therefore be a radical freedom, such that nothing whatever can determine its choice, including its own nature.”<sup>180</sup> The question is then, “Why do some people act morally and others in reprehensible ways?” How do we account for the obvious moral difference in people’s behavior, especially with regard to God’s infinite benevolence? The challenge here is to explain why God allows the existence of morally abhorrent actions in the first place or why he allows the human will stray *this far*, such that truly heinous crimes threaten to eclipse or force into crisis the divine goodness itself. Once again, the notion of radical freedom is crucial here. We could say that God’s power lies precisely in endowing human beings with the ultimately free capacity to go one way or the other in their moral life, which, in turn, is anchored in their capacity to transcend material reality, governed by the senses.<sup>181</sup> Conversely, we are free insofar as we are also able to be weak-willed or perverse, which shows our capacity to choose even what is ultimately harmful to us.

In unpacking his understanding of the human will, Augustine tells us that a good will is “a will by which we seek to live rightly and honorably, and to attain the highest wisdom.”<sup>182</sup> One who possesses a good will has the ability to properly identify and locate the best possible good for the human beings, to not be led astray, deceived, and tempted

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> King, “Introduction.”

<sup>181</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 106.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

by the lesser goods, no matter how compelling they appear. Thus, the better the will is, the closer it is to God. Furthermore, “when anyone has a good will, he surely has something to be put far ahead of all earthly kingdoms and all bodily pleasures.”<sup>183</sup> The good is thus animated by the desire of a completely different order, the desire for the greatest possible wisdom, not the worldly desires for material or sensuous things. We will go back to the question of bodily matters shortly.

Following the logic of radical freedom, i.e., the freedom to will either good or evil, we are responsible for our choices that result in evil, since it is within our power to choose and act otherwise. Anyone can have a good will, for, as Augustine points out, “human wisdom is the governance of the human mind.”<sup>184</sup> The mind is said to be ‘in order’ when it is cultivated and powerful enough to trump earthly desires and to pursue higher, divine wisdom. In other words, “nothing makes the mind a devotee of desire but its own will and free choice.”<sup>185</sup>

What is important here is understanding the relationship between the mind and the senses or perception, since it is precisely this distinction that is responsible for the difference between a good will and a bad one. We easily believe in the existence of sensible objects because they are readily available to our senses. This is how we inhabit the world most of the time, making our way through what is given to us in our sensibilities. However, intelligible objects exist just as well, insofar as they are presented to our minds and insofar as we are able to conceive of them. The intelligible object *par excellence* is truth in its eternal character, and we see some of this truth in mathematics,

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

which is present to our intellect just as material things are present to our senses. The truth found in mathematics is independent of our minds, it precedes and surpasses them, and we must recognize it. It is not subject to our likes or dislikes, our arguments or opinions. Thus, this truth is higher and infinitely greater than our minds. It is eternal, unchanging, exceeding our senses and our private desires. What is higher than human beings and eternal is divine by nature, accessible not through perception, but through the intellect alone. Thus, we have to choose between following our senses or our intellect and the truths available to it.

Augustine thus identifies those who orient themselves toward the highest, extra-sensible good (since God cannot be surpassed in benevolence) as possessing virtue or a good will and those who align themselves with private, material desires. In his own words, “we have also explicitly and adequately distinguished two kinds of things, the eternal and the temporal, and again two kinds of people: some who follow and take delight in eternal things, and others who follow and take delight in temporal things.”<sup>186</sup> Furthermore, since God does not interfere with our exercise of our will, allowing for the radicality of our freedom, “what each person elects to pursue and embrace is located in the will, and that the mind is not thrown down from its stronghold of dominance, and from the right order, by anything but the will.”<sup>187</sup> Which is to say, on Augustine’s terms, we cannot blame any external influences for making the choices we do. The pursuit of sensible goods and bodily pleasures comes from our independent, uncoerced decision. Finally, “when a person uses something in an evil manner, the thing should not be

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 53.

blamed, but rather the person using it in that evil manner.”<sup>188</sup> The objects that ultimately bring about our moral decline cannot be said to be inherently bad, since it is our relation to them that makes them appear so.

What does this tell us about Augustine’s understanding of evil? As he defines it, “evil is turning the will away from the unchangeable good and towards changeable good.”<sup>189</sup> It is the differences between recognizing the greatest good exceeding our bodily existence and choosing to pursue a lower kind of good. This, in a nutshell, is the difference between good and evil, where the human will is the final arbiter. We can thus say that evil is essentially a privation, since it is a *negative* relation to what exists truly and eternally. Indeed, it is an active, freely willed refusal of the highest possible existence, i.e., God, which means turning toward a kind of nothingness, dissolution, and decay. As Ricoeur elucidates,

Augustine takes the idea that evil cannot be held to be a *substance*, because to think of being is to think of something one, intelligible, and good.... In return, a new idea of *nothingness* comes to light, that of the *ex nihilo* contained in the idea of a total and complete creation, and associated with it, the idea of an ontic distance between the creator and the creature, therefore of the “deficiency” pertaining to creatures as such. In virtue of this deficiency, it becomes comprehensible that creatures endowed with a free will could “turn away” from God and “toward” what has less being, toward nothingness.<sup>190</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting a somewhat circular logic that Augustine employs in his discussion of the will and virtue, when it comes to accounting for why some people will good and some will evil. As Van Riel points out, “the virtuous person understands virtue and makes the right choices, in accordance with right reason *because* she is virtuous

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>190</sup> Ricoeur, “Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 639.

already.”<sup>191</sup> We are left with the fact that some people always already have a ‘taste’ for divine virtue, which sets them on the right path, and some do not. As Van Riel further explains, “this circularity will ultimately be reduced to the question of Grace: those who are elect will understand the Good and know the way to true happiness, even if their sinful nature prevents them from having a full understanding of it. But nevertheless, God’s Grace will enable them to make the right decisions.”<sup>192</sup> Thus, the question of why some people choose good things and some choose to do evil remains ultimately unaddressed.

While I was not able to do justice to the intricacies and sophistication of Augustine’s argumentation,<sup>193</sup> I hope that I have highlighted the relationship between God as the pinnacle of existence, wisdom, and goodness, the freedom of the human will, and evil understood as rejecting the fullness of God’s existence. Simply put, God ‘allows’ for the presence of evil in the world because he endowed human beings with the freedom of choice. Furthermore, the evil that human beings choose is the absence of being, for being is God. Thus, we could say that Augustine disintegrates a scene of evil into privation or nothingness.

Second, in addition to the decisive separation of evil and existence, we are going to see evils fundamentally divorced from thinking, at least *real* thinking. To be sure, there are premeditated crimes, but let us first look at a particularly eloquent, contemporary account of violence. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it,

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<sup>191</sup> Gerd Van Riel, “Augustine’s Will: An Aristotelian Notion? On the Antecedents of Augustine’s Doctrine of the Will,” *Augustinian Studies* 38 (2007): pp. 255-279, especially pp. 274-75.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> For a thorough discussion of Augustine’s thinking, see Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Octagon Books, 1988).

violence remains outside; it knows nothing of the system, the world, the set-up that it assaults (whether it is a person or a group, a body or a language). Rather than compossible, it wants, on the contrary, to be impossible, intolerable within the space of compossibles that it rips apart and destroys. Violence ‘doesn’t want to hear it’; it has no interest in knowing. It is not interested in being anything but this ignorance or deliberate blindness, a stubborn will that removes itself from any set of connections and is concerned only with its own shattering intrusion. [...] This is why violence is profoundly stupid. It is stupid in the strongest sense, the thickest and most irremediable sense.<sup>194</sup>

In other words, for Nancy, violence and aggression begin where thinking ends or rather fails. However, once we attribute profound stupidity to violence, we refuse to take into account the genesis of violent affects, the genesis that cannot be divorced from thought, a certain social narrative that forms the basis of the evil-doer’s identity, ideology, and consciousness. To say that violence is the pinnacle of stupidity, as if it appears *ex nihilo*, is to refuse to analyze the circumstances around it.

A somewhat similar idea was expressed by the Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt when, in attending the trial of Nazi lieutenant-colonel Adolf Eichmann, she coined the infamous phrase “the banality of evil.” As she saw it, “evil had to be pulled down from the heights of the demonic to the lows of modern bureaucracy and thoughtlessness.”<sup>195</sup> In her attempts to rethink moral responsibility in the aftermath of mass human destruction, later called ‘the crimes against humanity,’ Arendt saw Eichmann as fundamentally *instrumental, obedient, shallow*. To be sure,

she did not mean that what Eichmann had helped to perpetrate was banal or that the extermination of the Jews, and of other peoples, by the Nazis was banal. It takes either a great deal of hermeneutic blindness and ill will or both to miss her meaning in the usage of this term, even if one may disagree with the assessment of Eichmann’s psychology. The phrase the “banality of evil” was meant to refer to

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<sup>194</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>195</sup> George Cotkin, “Illuminating Evil: Hannah Arendt and Moral History,” *Modern Intellectual History*, 4, 3 (2007), pp. 463-490, see 485.

*a specific quality of mind and character* of the doer himself, but neither to the deeds nor to the principles behind those deeds.<sup>196</sup>

This is to say, as we are about to see, Eichmann decided to become one of the driving forces behind the Holocaust neither out of fanatical anti-Semitism nor pure malice or sadism, but out of an utterly thoughtless combination of careerism and obedience. “Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement,” Arendt writes scathingly, “he had no motives at all.”<sup>197</sup> This is as if actions acquired their own life independent of the doer. Indeed, “the phenomenon that Arendt confronted was one in which monstrous deeds were committed without monstrous motives.”<sup>198</sup>

As Richard Bernstein points out, in his turn, “Arendt constantly stresses how the unprecedented event of twentieth-century totalitarianism has ruptured our traditional moral and political concepts and standards.”<sup>199</sup> In other words, the monstrosities of the receding century destroyed the basic coordinates of our structures of understanding, which is to say that no traditional views, habits, and concepts could help us understand the overwhelming monstrosity of the Holocaust. Nothing in our culture prepared us to understand the systematic annihilation of masses of people. Elsewhere, Arendt eloquently states that

Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer

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<sup>196</sup> Seyla Benhabib, “Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 74.

<sup>197</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), PDF pagination.

<sup>198</sup> Mary Clark, *Augustine: Philosopher of Freedom* (New York: Desclee, 1958), 218.

<sup>199</sup> Craig Calhoun, J., and John McGowan, *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 298.

felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality.<sup>200</sup>

Thus, comprehension both pits us against reality and allows us enough space to not coincide with it fully, not to be swept by it without thinking or judging. We do not coincide with reality, even while facing up to it, insofar as we are capable of being shocked by our experiences and insofar as we can imagine things being *otherwise*, insofar as we are capable of judging between right and wrong, between what ought and what ought not to happen. It is this essentially human need and desire to understand that animates Arendt's work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

What was it then that ran against our comprehension in Eichmann's case? According to Shoshana Felman, the unique problem he posed is that of understanding "crimes against humanity" outside the traditional framework of motif, intention, or *mens rea*?<sup>201</sup> In describing Eichmann's clichéd language ("he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché"<sup>202</sup>) and his all-too-credible self-justification by the total absence of motives for the mass murder he passionately carried out (lack of *mens rea*), Arendt's question is not, "How can evil (Eichmann) be so banal?" but, "How do we situate this empty, clichéd subjectivity vis-à-vis the problem of evil?" Indeed, "Eichmann's crimes were not rooted in a wicked character... he had no character to be wicked."<sup>203</sup> How do we understand evil if the categories of character and intention

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<sup>200</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Press, 1973), viii.

<sup>201</sup> Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 108.

<sup>202</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, PDF pagination.

<sup>203</sup> Charles Mathewes, T., *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 167.



are now forced into crisis? It is worth noting that what is at stake here is not the suspicion that, thanks to his exceeding ordinariness, there is a little bit of Eichmann in all of us.<sup>204</sup> Rather, what is at stake is articulating what *distinguishes* him from the rest of us, if the usual measure of interiority (placing one's intentions on a continuum of acceptability or viciousness, for example) is rendered useless.

“Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide?” Arendt asks.<sup>205</sup> Following this crucial and perhaps rhetorical question, she attempts to articulate the key distinctions between a kind of ‘empty’ subjectivity, for whom reality is nothing more than following and obeying the demands of its superiors,<sup>206</sup> without reservation, questioning, or judgment, without pausing in one's tracks when asked to deliver millions of people to their death, the ‘demonic’ criminal who is very well aware of the evil nature of his actions, and the subjectivity that does not cease to engage in the activity of thinking and judging. The former is thus indicative of deadened passivity, leading to the capacity to commit mindless acts of horrific evil, a halted interiority, while the latter embraces the anguish of actively facing up to reality in all of its horrors and contradictions.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> This facile interpretation is eloquently refuted by Minnich. See Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, *The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 15.

<sup>205</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, PDF pagination.

<sup>206</sup> “Eichmann's voice of conscience was not silenced.... It was caught up in the voice of another; his voice had literally been “voiced over” with the voice of Himmler. His elated voice of conscience not only identifies the law with the will of Hitler, but at the same time, Eichmann's desires and fantasies become identified with Hitler's.” T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 92.

<sup>207</sup> According to Young-Bruehl, “these banal people are very different from (and potentially much more dangerous and destructive than) a rarer type, wicked people (radically evil people, in Kant's terms), who, rather than not hearing their thinking

While Arendt never contests the fact that Eichmann was undeniably guilty, guilty beyond any reasonable doubt, her bigger concern is the sweeping collapse of moral habits and moral behavior both among the victims and the perpetrators, i.e., the German society as a whole, and its devastating consequences. As Bernstein writes, “for Arendt the most intractable moral questions arose not from the Nazis’ behavior, but the behavior of ordinary, respectable people.”<sup>208</sup> She charges the majority of the German people with their failure to resist the regime that commanded them to become the murderers of their own friends and neighbors, opting to collaborate with the enemy instead. Arendt took issue with the claim that Eichmann “closed his ears to the voice of conscience,” for it is precisely *the lack* of conscience that formed his most terrifying characteristics.<sup>209</sup> Indeed, his “conscience” was akin to an empty cipher, a void, speaking in the voice of “respectable society.”<sup>210</sup> This society failed to condemn his for murdering millions of innocent people, so much that Eichmann genuinely believed that there was nothing particularly wrong with his conduct. As Arendt writes in her lecture course “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” the central belief of her generation was that moral conduct was a matter of course, that it was taken for granted, yet what followed after the rise of the Nazis was the swift, devastating dissolution of mores, such that murder became completely permissible. In Margaret Canovan’s words, “although these [ordinary] people would never have dreamed of committing as long as they lived in a society where such activities were not usual, they adapted effortlessly to a system in

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partner, hear it but overcome it, silencing all objections.” Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 189.

<sup>208</sup> Richard Bernstein, “*The Banality of Evil* Reconsidered,” *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, 303

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 89.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

which blatant crimes against whole categories of people were standard behavior.”<sup>211</sup> In the new society, murder became the new norm, it became fully acceptable, thus erasing the possible conflict between individual choices and actions and the judgment of the public. The question became, “How can I tell right from wrong if the majority or my whole environment has prejudiced the issue? *Who am I to judge?*”<sup>212</sup> Which is to say, standing by one’s judgment vis-à-vis those who condemn it requires a certain degree of courage and even hubris. It is worth noting that Harpham sees distinctions and refinements as “central to the ethical enterprise itself,”<sup>213</sup> while Grants states that “a morality of nuanced judgment exhibits a rich moral imagination, an intelligent and self-critical encounter with a complex world.”<sup>214</sup> Furthermore, “mores, customs, habits, rules, traditional standards could all change effortlessly... they provided no barrier to committing evil deeds.”<sup>215</sup> The tradition that was supposed to safeguard us against truly monstrous acts of evil and the prospect of the annihilation of an entire people was now in ruins.

Before returning to Eichmann, let us say a bit more about Arendt’s response to the moral failure of the German people, such that Eichmann’s actions remained unchallenged and even widely accepted. According to Bernstein, “Arendt came to believe that the capacity to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, presupposes the exercise of the

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<sup>211</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 95.

<sup>212</sup> Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” *Responsibility and Judgment*, 18.

<sup>213</sup> Geoffrey Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), x.

<sup>214</sup> Ruth Grant, *Naming Evil, Judging Evil* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006), 139.

<sup>215</sup> Bernstein, “*The Banality of Evil Reconsidered*,” *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, 304.

mental activities of thinking and judging.”<sup>216</sup> As we are about to see, this is precisely what Eichmann disastrously lacked, which is why his subjectivity remained empty and shallow. What Arendt terms ‘the banality of evil’ is the failure to exercise one’s capacity to think and to judge, i.e., to become fully human. Thinking attempts to go behind the surface, to study and attempt to understand its depth, and yet it is precisely what Eichmann was missing.

Continuing with the claim that Eichmann was thoroughly unable to engage in the activity of thinking, Arendt writes, “it was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”<sup>217</sup> Even facing his own death, moments before his execution, Eichmann approached the gallows with the lofty, clichéd words, the words borrowed from the funeral speeches he had heard before, thus showing his inability to find the words of his own, in the wake of his monstrous actions, even facing his own death. We thus read that “such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.”<sup>218</sup> One could thus say that Eichmann’s thoughtlessness protected him from any possible conflict between his individual actions and the devastating ‘ripples’ of these actions permeating the fabric of the world around him.

In the remaining part of this discussion, I intend to flesh out the term “the banality of evil” some more, albeit cursorily, and to briefly examine Arendt’s understanding of

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>217</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, PDF pagination.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

thinking. In her essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” she attempts to clarify the former by saying,

some years ago, reporting on the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of “the banality of evil” and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think.<sup>219</sup>

Thus, what Arendt finds so deeply troubling about Eichmann is not his deviousness or some sort of satanic grandeur of pathological delusion. As Felman reminds us, Arendt’s goal was *not* to provide a psychological portrait of the criminal. It is his rather “ordinariness” and “normality,” which is synonymous with his thoughtlessness, that truly stunned her. Eichmann famously denied having any personal hatred for the Jews. His actions thus seemed to have been motivated by nothing other than his genuine desire to please his superiors and to advance his career. What continued to haunt Arendt for many years to come was the fact that that an average, seemingly normal person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong.<sup>220</sup>

It is worth noting that Arendt did not regard Eichmann’s empty talk with suspicion, as a ruse, meant to conceal his true devious thoughts and intentions, which is something I will briefly return to. Instead, she saw it as the only thing he was capable of

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<sup>219</sup> Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” *Social Research*, 38:3 (1971: Autumn).

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, PDF pagination.

when it came to his justifications of his behavior. The horror of his actions could not penetrate the wall of shallowness and thoughtlessness. Indeed,

clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence.... the difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.<sup>221</sup>

Just like comprehension means facing up to reality and the refusal to neutralize the shock of experience, thoughtlessness isolates us from the weight of reality, promising the kind of comfort where other human lives are truly worthless, worthless because they did not even enter Eichmann's mind, which is to say, because other human beings did not even really exist for him. According to Arendt, a failure of thinking means disengaging from the contradictions of the world around us, meaning that one is no longer driven to understand reality as it truly is.

As Arendt subsequently asks, "Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought?"<sup>222</sup> Can judging right from wrong be inseparable from and dependent on thinking? Furthermore, "could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it conditions men against evil-doing?"<sup>223</sup> If the exercise of thinking has the potential of safeguarding us from committing the worst crimes imaginable, the task is then to understand what exactly Arendt means by thinking, especially in its relation to evil-doing.

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research*, 423.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

Thinking, for Arendt, is emphatically not that of professional philosophers, a skill limited to the learned few, but is something everyone can practice. It is something that is inseparable from what it means to be human and to inhabit the world. She defines it as a kind of “the soundless dialogue between me and myself, the two-in-one,”<sup>224</sup> where one converses with oneself about the events in the world and one’s role in them. As she puts it,

the Socratic-Platonic description of the process of thinking seems to me so important because it implies, albeit only in passing, the fact that men exist in the plural and not in the singular, that men and not Man inhabit the earth. Even if we are by ourselves, when we articulate or actualize this being-alone we find that we are in company, in the company of ourselves.... Seen from this standpoint, it is indeed true that my conduct toward others will depend on my conduct toward myself.<sup>225</sup>

The Socratic relentless questioning famously destabilized and destroyed the preexisting certainties of his interlocutors, such that, when asked and prodded about the definition of, to take an example, justice, his interlocutors felt their facile grasp of the issue at hand crumble. The aim of Socratic questioning is to strip away the comforting simplicity and lack of ambiguity from the matter at hand. This internal dialogue Arendt ascribes a high value to, a kind of incessant interpretation and assessment of the events of the day and one’s own actions, does not result in any doctrines or certainties. If anything, “thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics.”<sup>226</sup> Thus understood, one who engages in thinking does not arrive at anything properly positive or productive, thus remaining an essentially

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” *Responsibility and Judgment*, 184.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” *Responsibility and Judgment*, 96.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” *Social Research*, 434.

negative activity. Yet, Arendt also insists that while thinking requires a withdrawal from the world, it is inseparable from the activity of judgment, which is concerned not with the universals, but with the particulars.<sup>227</sup> In withdrawing from the world, we still remain surrounded or even haunted by the worldly phenomena insofar as we undertake the work of judgment. Even in the solitude of thinking, we engage with the worldly affairs. “Thinking beings,” she states, “which still belong to the world of appearances even after they have mentally withdrawn from it, have an urge to speak and thus to make manifest what otherwise would not be a part of the appearing world at all.”<sup>228</sup> Thinking is thus inseparable from its expression in the world.

Furthermore, our retreat allows us to be alone with ourselves, which, on Arendt’s terms, means conversing with one’s inner interlocutor. In this silent dialogue, one narrates to oneself the events of the day, so to speak, the events in which one is an agent or actor among other actors, in order to make sense of them and to integrate them into one’s life-story. Indeed, “the thinking that she describes and practices is a creative activity which requires remembrance, story-telling, and imagination... It also requires the virtues of both courage and independence.<sup>229</sup> We need courage and independence to unmoor ourselves from the weight of social beliefs, a kind of facile ‘going along’ with whatever the majority of people happen to agree on, and to stand by one’s own judgment, no matter what kind of reception it provokes in others. In and through thinking and this dialogue, we bring into existence the self we must live with, the sense of the self that is most pronounced in solitude and yet is also reflected back to us from the world, insofar as

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., *The Life of the Mind*, 98.

<sup>229</sup> Bernstein, “Arendt on Thinking,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 279.



the world is the space of visibility where we act. Thinking, for Arendt, thus necessarily includes judgment. Indeed, “reflection is the beginning of judgment. Resolving not to do wrong in the understanding of how wrong-doing puts thinking out of joint, goes beyond thinking itself. This is what judgment must do.”<sup>230</sup>

However, why exactly does Arendt place so much value on thinking as a kind of banister against evil? Indeed, are evil and thinking truly antithetical, as she wants us to believe? After all, Eichmann was seen as lacking the faculty of thinking first and foremost, not judgment as such. It seems to me that Arendt sees some hope in the process of thinking for two main reasons. One is that stepping away from the world gives one a chance to not be simply swept away by the current of the present, i.e., to not blindly follow whatever might be happening at the moment, freeing up the cognitive space for judgment. For example, risking a certain oversimplification, we could say that, if one is given an order, thinking *ought to* make one pause to evaluate the order in question and decide, via judgment, to either obey or disobey it. Thinking allows an order or, more generally, an event or a political situation to become *a problem*. Furthermore, it has to do precisely with the sweeping collapse of all moral habits and tradition, the collapse devastating in its swiftness. If mores can indeed change overnight, we can no longer trust societal norms to act as a barrier against evil. Thus, we can argue that the destructive nature of thinking, such that it dismantles all certainties, is not an unfortunate feature of it, but rather its key advantage, since it can and does ‘work’ even in the absence of mores and certitudes. Once we realize that no mores truly hold up to scrutiny, that there are no

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<sup>230</sup> Max Deutscher, *Judgment After Arendt* (London: Routledge, 2007), 127.

‘exterior’ barriers against evil, we fall back on our own sense of right and wrong.

According to Arendt,

in refusing to be a person, Eichmann utterly surrendered that single most defining human quality, that of being able to think. And consequently, he was no longer capable of making moral judgments. This inability to think created the possibility for many ordinary men to commit evil deeds on a gigantic scale, the likes of which one had never seen before. It is true, I have considered these questions in a philosophical way. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge, but the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And I hope that thinking gives people the strength to prevent catastrophes in these rare moments when the chips are down.<sup>231</sup>

Paradoxically and perhaps dangerously, thinking frees us from our reliance on the existing traditions and the comportment of others around us. Thinking individualizes, for it gives us the opportunity to tap into our inner sense of right and wrong and to judge matters accordingly, even if everyone else decides that, for instance, murder of innocent people is quite acceptable. This is the resistance of one mind to the opinions and actions of the many. According to Bernstein, “Arendt also stresses that thinking is essential for the formation of conscience. She claims that the supreme imperative for Socrates is to try to live in such a manner so that he is not in contradiction with himself.”<sup>232</sup> However, the hope that, in turning to our sense of right and wrong, we will judge with human decency or fairness and make the right decision in the face of injustice, is slim at best, yet I believe that it constitutes the heart of Arendt’s response to the collapse of all moral traditions and attitudes.

Thus, the subjectivity exemplified by Eichmann does not converse with itself in solitude and it does not perceive any conflict between one’s actions and one’s account of these actions. Eichmann failed to see a monstrous incongruity between his alleged lack of

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<sup>231</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, PDF pagination.

<sup>232</sup> Bernstein, “Arendt on Thinking” *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 281.

hatred of the Jewish people and his efficiency in killing them, even though recognizing this incongruity might have made him see his actions in a different, *moral* light and possibly put an end to them. However, I submit that Arendt's equation of evil with thoughtlessness is problematic at worst and insufficient at best.<sup>233</sup> In *Situating the Self*, we read that

if the basis of the validity of our moral judgments is that they allow us “to be at home with ourselves,” are we not in fact making validity a matter of the idiosyncrasies of the individual psyche? Was not one of the most perplexing characteristics of Eichmann in Arendt's eyes precisely the fact that he was “at home” with himself? Arendt fails to convince that an attitude of moral reflection and probing, such as enjoined by the procedure of enlarged thought, and the Platonic emphasis on unity or harmony of the soul with itself can be reconciled.<sup>234</sup>

The problem is that, in appealing to some kind of drive to internal unity that we supposedly have, the unity defined by an engagement with contradictions and incongruities, Arendt understates the idea that even the most horrific criminals may in fact have an internal dialogue where they narrate their actions in their silent voice and yet remain perfectly at home with themselves. The idea that individuals, at least the individuals such as the likes of Eichmann, fail to think while committing acts of evil seems admittedly odd.<sup>235</sup> Likewise, it is unclear why the dissolution of all certainties that results from thinking would lead to a sense of unity within oneself, although it is possible

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<sup>233</sup> Arendt's depiction of Eichmann as thoughtless has been subsequently subjected to harsh criticism. According to Cesarani, Eichmann did think, did choose to make himself into what he became, a “genocidaire.” David Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a “Desk Murderer”* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2007), pp. 6, 11, 344-55.

<sup>234</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 138.

<sup>235</sup> Koonz made a similar argument, according to which, as abhorrent as it is, mass murderers believed that they were acting morally and “followed a coherent set of severe ethical maxims derived from broad philosophical concepts.” Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.

that genuine introspection has the potential of fortifying our existing beliefs. The problem goes even further insofar as Arendt does not truly differentiate “the thinking that may prevent catastrophes from the thinking that does not,”<sup>236</sup> possibly because nothing is said about the content or orientation of this thinking. Which is to say, in accordance with this view, even the right kind of thinking remains individualistic or idiosyncratic and, in encountering catastrophic injustices, it does not seem to articulate any concrete features of evil that might help us resist and halt it.<sup>237</sup> While Arendt’s account is undoubtedly both provocative and nuanced, I would like to suggest that the banality of evil, at the very least of Eichmann’s evil, is the absence or failure of thinking, i.e., a particular kind of privation. Indeed, “for Arendt evil is ontologically describable only negatively, in terms of what it destroys and what it lacks.”<sup>238</sup> This banality means that there is no depth to probe, no hidden motifs to fathom. Similarly, it is worth noting that aligning the question of evil with a failure of subjectivity tells us more about the possible *origins* of evil and not about the ways in which evil presents itself in the world or the specific measures that need to take place to reduce the amount or intensity of evil. The life of the wrongdoer, as we learn from the analysis of one of the worst criminals we know as Eichmann, is the life that is arrested in its development, paradoxically deadened, i.e., not properly or fully human.

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<sup>236</sup> Bernstein, “Arendt on Thinking,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 291.  
<sup>237</sup> Even though I cannot explicate this matter within the scope of this work, what Arendt says about the role of examples in guiding our moral behavior, given the fragility of societal norms, does seem like a more fruitful direction. Thus, “in the last analysis . . . our decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company, with whom we wish to spend our lives. And this company is chosen through thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, and in examples of incidents. . . .” Moreover, it is the task of imagination to provide us with examples of judgment. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 80, 113.

<sup>238</sup> Mathewes, *Evil And The Augustinian Tradition*, 168.

What we have learned about the phenomenon of evil so far, given the accounts outlined above, indicates that it is mute, thoughtless, devoid of intention, either because it is a purely destructive affect (such that, in committing acts of evil, human beings turn away from God *qua* being) or because it is driven by, for example, an utterly prosaic, superficial careerism or obedience, which would be the example of Eichmann. Once again, evil is a kind of absence, i.e., thoughtlessness.<sup>239</sup> It has no *being* of its own. It is the Good that failed to take place.<sup>240</sup> We read that

evil is essentially a matter of absence... Not simply a metaphorical and subjective “absence,” such as the absence of conscience in the individual actor; rather, it is the literal absence of a lively and responsive presence with which we can engage in mutually creating and sustaining a human and public world. Evil is essentially a threat *external to* our real “worldly” existence, a threat whose “reality” exists only beyond the boundaries of our world.<sup>241</sup>

Thus, we can conclude that while Augustine dissolves a scene of evil into nothingness, Arendt dissolves it into the failure to think.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Interestingly, Ophir notes that “one of the main things I am trying to do in my book is to move away from the kind of discourse that associates evil with the unintelligible, the inexplicable, an experience with no corresponding concept, beyond words, etc. I tried to find a language that would describe evil in its plurality, systematicity, account for the multiplicity of its roots and effects, and for the infinite, singular ways it can be experienced. I looked for a language that would be attentive to the social-political constructedness of evils, without however ignoring the personal, singular experience of each one of them. The experience of evils always has residues that are inexpressible, perhaps unthinkable, but this is the nature of experience, not of evil. A headache, the pleasure of a kiss, the joy expressed by a smile, the bitter sense of a failure—all have residues of this kind.” Ophir, personal correspondence, 01/31/2016.

<sup>240</sup> Concerning Auschwitz, “Arendt said the impossible became true. To seek understanding, explanation, catharsis, consolation—all goals of philosophical and literary reflection about earlier forms of evil—seems out of place.” Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 238.

<sup>241</sup> Mathewes, *Evil And The Augustinian Tradition*, 168.

<sup>242</sup> Let us note that Arendt first spoke of “radical evil” in her reflections on totalitarianism, which she understood as rendering entire groups of people superfluous. It seems to me that had she decided to develop the problem of making human beings

However, in a decisive departure from the view that sees evil as privation, as radically divorced from being, it is the very category of being that becomes the starting point of Adi Ophir's investigation of the question of evil and morality in *The Order of Evils*. In fact, the strength of his theory is that he pulls evil back into this world. No longer is it simply the concern of the theologian or those concerned with the transcendent realm. Stating the problem in decidedly non-theist terms, Ophir sees evil as real, it is of this world, and it has a being of its own.

It is worth noting from the outset that Ophir uses the term 'Evil' to designate the totality of evils in the world. The ways of Being (roughly understood as what determines beings as beings,<sup>243</sup> that maddeningly mysterious and elusive spark that separates the living from the dead, following Heidegger's famous distinction between Being and beings who take up the former in their questioning) are infinitely great. What I want to emphasize here, however, is the specificity or tangibility of the category of being, the

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superfluous, her account of evil would have been more powerful and more world-oriented. As Cocks states, examining Arendt's account of totalitarian evil, she is "bleak about the national question because... she sees it as a riddle with no solution. More than her alienation from collective political action and the extraordinary darkness of her times, it is her view of the national question as a conundrum that makes Arendt so well-suited a thinker for us. She warns us that once modern rootlessness undermines the organic homogeneity of peoples in every region, all answers to the national question are bad.... These answers include the nation as a society of heterogeneous strangers joined only by the same central state, or the nation as a unified culture created and imposed by state authority; the formal distinction and protection of ethnic minorities, or the disappearance of minorities through their cultural assimilation or physical liquidation; the exclusion of "non-nationals" by the nation-state, or its indiscriminate inclusion of them until "the nation" swells up to universal size; the domination of a minority people by a national majority, or the minority's acquisition of its own separate nation-state, with the domination of some new minority people and the further political fracturing of the human race as inescapable results." Joan Cocks, "On Commonality, Nationalism, and Violence: Hannah Arendt, Rosa Luxemburg, and Frantz Fanon," *Women in German Yearbook*, Vol. 12 (1996), pp. 39-51, 48, 51.

<sup>243</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper, 1962), PDF pagination.

way Ophir understands it, such that it is stripped of any ghostliness or unintelligibility. Taking into account the conjunction of being and evil, our attention is redirected from what has fallen through the cracks of existence, has been omitted, or failed to take place, to what can be described, studied, contextualized, and ultimately halted or prevented. This is no longer the question of *imagining* things to be otherwise, but rather of recognizing their stubborn presence.

The possibilities of being fall along the lines of necessity and contingency or superfluity,<sup>244</sup> presence and absence, past and future, what may be and what could have been. The possibility that Ophir seizes on is superfluity. In other words, it indicates a kind of excess, an overflowing, or abundance. Superfluity has no uses and no justifications. Crucially, Ophir submits that *evil is a superfluous way of being*,<sup>245</sup> i.e., that there is something irredeemably stubborn and concrete about its multiple manifestations, and that it is superfluous, that it should not be, that has no place and no part to play, unless it hides in plain sight. Indeed, superfluity can and often *is* disguised as necessary, as part of the natural order of things, as something that goes far beyond the workings of human beings, yet, once the masquerade is undone, it refuses justification and normalization. In other words, *evil becomes an ontological category and activity*, insofar as it is tangibly present in the world and insofar as it is subject to increase or reduction, worsening or

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<sup>244</sup> “That which is necessary cannot be superfluous. In the moral domain, superfluity, not contingency, is the opposite of necessity.” Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 408.

<sup>245</sup> It is worth noting that while Philippe Nemo speaks to the conjunction of evil and superfluity or excess, capitalizing on the way evil shatters the order of things, he asserts that breaking the world as if it were an idol opens the possibility of something other than the world. Needless to say, this is the opposite of the thrust of Ophir’s philosophy. In introducing what is other than the world, the world of senseless evil and ruins, Nemo appears to offer a justification to evil as excess. Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

amelioration, prevention or remediation. It is, therefore, neither a diabolical element in the darkness of the human heart, something that forever eludes scrutiny and visibility, nor a meaningless, thoughtless absence of the good. One of the tasks Ophir takes up in addressing evil is precisely to strip superfluity of its disguises.

As he writes,

the moral ‘ought’ is not presented here as the opposite of the ‘is.’ Rather, it is the opposite of a certain possibility of the being of Being—the being of a superfluous excess, which is precisely the being that ought to be abolished. For one to understand what is proper (that is, what ought to be done), there is no need for a moral law that allegedly floats above reality or is somehow intuited or uncovered beyond it. It is enough to understand superfluous evil, whose unnecessary evils that could have been prevented or reduced but were not.<sup>246</sup>

This is Ophir’s task, which is to understand, to think, to examine, with a view to reducing evil, which is exactly the task I take up as well. To understand something is to inhabit language, it is to give something an expression, a specificity. Thus, he seeks to give evil a tongue, “an idiom that will enable one to express Evil as part of reality, a quotidian, routine.... Instead of confronting the source of Evil, that which allegedly lies at the essence of man’s body or soul or of the political regime, this treatise examines the unnecessary social and historical production of evil.” We can probably all agree that locating evil in the darkness of the inevitably singular, idiosyncratic human heart is futile. We should also take stock of the idea that to locate evil in one particular political regime is both to drastically limit its scope (if totalitarianism produces evil, then how do we account for evils under the conditions of democracy?) and to reduce its being to the being of the political regime in question. The task of understanding, as Ophir presents it, aims not at the full exercise of the properly human faculties (e.g., cultivating the faculty of

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<sup>246</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 15.



thinking or judging), but rather at grasping and unmasking the superfluity of evil for what it is. What is at stake here is not a general examination of whatever situation we find ourselves in, but questioning into the guises superfluity tends to assume. Thus, the first step in understanding evil is both to anchor it in worldly specificity and to see it as fundamentally unnecessary, superfluous, to de-naturalize it.

Let us think about this for a moment. What does it mean to say that something is unnecessary? This is certainly not the banality of the subject, the way Arendt saw it, since we are no longer fusing together the question of evil with whatever subjective features of the person who commits a crime that might accompany it. Rather, we are starting with the seemingly straightforward, yet central insight that most of us tend to leave things unaltered and unchallenged when they appear necessary to us and we seek change when the superfluous nature of the situation is fully revealed to us. In short, superfluity *activates* our agency, while necessity fails to incite us to action. Stated more strongly, necessity condemns us to passivity in a world where even change or transformation is stripped of spontaneity and unforeseen blossoming into existence, without a shadow of possible non-existence falling over it. The idea of superfluity is, on the other hand, closely associated with the drive to change the things we believe ought not to be. If necessity goes hand in hand with acceptance, superfluity provokes revolt. Furthermore, this claim is followed by the observation that things often *appear* necessary when we are immersed in them, *when we get so used to them that we no longer pay any attention*. The function of habit and mundaneness is thus to reinforce the semblance of necessity. Indeed, all this stuff around us just *is*, e.g., things, ideas, experiences, habits, saturated with false familiarity and man-made character, comprising a dynamic web of human

actions and decisions, past, present, and future. But what if we are suddenly talking about “the evil things that make people’s lives bad”? Things like, Ophir goes on to say, “pain, suffering, loss, humiliation, damage, terror, alienation, and ennui.”<sup>247</sup> If these things are man-made as well, how do we unmake them?

One other key element that emerges here, in addition to the notion of superfluity, is the term ‘production.’ The man-made things have a story to tell, a story written in the ink of human action. To take a fairly innocuous example, imagine an unfortunate spat you had with your friend recently. It turned out to be much more serious and injurious than it first seemed. Your friend’s feelings are hurt and the relationship has been damaged. In this case, you are the cause of saying something hurtful to them and, in a moral moment according to Ophir, you say, “I’m sorry.” If your apology is sincere and your friend is willing to accept it, the pain of the conflict is lessened or gone completely. Using this logic in a wide array of other scenarios, we can say that to examine an instance of evil is to break it down into ‘chunks’ of human actions, decisions, experiences, and words, the chunks it depends on for its very existence, so as to minimize or undo it completely.

Thus, “to assume that the social production of evils has more or less ordered patterns, which can be exposed and changed, is to attempt to develop a more or less ordered and systematic moral discourse... a systematic effort of the kind that lays its own foundations without presuming in advance to know how secure those foundations are.”<sup>248</sup> The moral theory that Ophir is outlining for us can be characterized by at least two things that concern us here. First, the first act of resisting evil is to learn to recognize its

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

superfluous nature, to strip it of its disguises, to de-naturalize it. It is to twist evil free from the illusion of necessity. Second, it tells us that the production and distribution of various evils has patterns, which de-emphasizes the question of origin *and* explains why we become accustomed to the presence of evil in the first place. What I mean here is that the production of evil tends to become repetitive, familiar, even dull, i.e., deeply entrenched in our daily life and in our basic sense of the world, accruing the semblance of necessity, an uncontested givenness, and justificatory narratives in the process. While recognizing the superfluity of evil does not always amount to revolt and while *can* does not automatically amount to *will*, Ophir points us in the direction of what is to be exposed, studied, and prevented in the most concrete terms possible. The subject of our study is thus the patterns of the social production of evils from the standpoint of reducing them.<sup>249</sup>

In conjoining evil, its patterns of production and distribution, and superfluity, Ophir introduces another key element, which is temporality. To state the obvious, the evils and catastrophes of the world happen in time. As we are about to see, however, time becomes a kind of link between our subjectivity or, more precisely, agency and instances of evils or catastrophes. Determining the temporal nature of a catastrophe (“Is it past, present, or about to happen?”) is the necessary precondition for responding to it morally and for deciding on the measures that must be taken in order to halt, minimize, or prevent it. Thus, grasping the nature of time when assessing a disaster as inseparable from the

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<sup>249</sup> Code offers a powerful critique that the ‘knower’ is a value-free, ideologically pure figure, such that the situatedness of the knower and her lived embodiment plays no role in her approach to what she studies. In a similar vein, Ophir is arguing that we do not pursue knowledge for its own sake, but with a view to minimizing evils. Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 16.

production of evils has far-reaching ethical and practical implications. Ophir's morality is thoroughly temporal, given the force of his argument that time and practice are perfectly capable of entering in a genuinely fruitful synthesis. But more about this later.

The nature of time and the category of urgency, a kind of moral prohibition on waiting, first come up when Ophir writes about the meaning of the Holocaust in Israeli culture and the status of 'Auschwitz' as a synonym of 'absolute' or 'radical' Evil, "a criterion for every possible evil, and an exemplary model for every future evil."<sup>250</sup> There is, as he puts it, a sacred halo surrounding this name, such that there is no space at all for thinking and responding to other evils.<sup>251</sup> Yet, it is precisely this space that he wants to create in Hebrew and in Israeli culture, "for thinking about other catastrophic events that may be less horrible than Auschwitz, perhaps, but whose call upon thought is much more urgent." "More urgent," he explains, "also because they involve an evil that is produced now, in conditions that can still be amended, or a future evil that could still be prevented."<sup>252</sup> While the catastrophe of Auschwitz does defy thought and comprehension in its monstrosity, which is to say that it resists becoming disassembled into the sum total of human actions and being placed on a continuum of other disasters, Ophir determines its significance here and now in terms of human agency by pointing out that the evil in question has already taken place. Past instances of evil demand a different kind of

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<sup>250</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 22.

<sup>251</sup> For a further discussion, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The Holocaust from War Crime to Trauma Drama," *European Journal of Social Theory*, Volume: 5 issue: 1, pp. 5-85.

<sup>252</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 23.

response than those that are still unfolding.<sup>253</sup> In short, the past disasters do not exert a pull on our sense of agency as much as the ongoing ones.

Here Ophir reorients us in time, as it were, infusing it with moral significance and potential for activating our agency or capacity for revolt. Even though what has happened before us may have been unprecedented in its heinousness, we cannot change the past, we can only learn from it, if even that. As agents oriented toward the past, we remain powerless, oscillating between the simple and often tempting forgetting of what has happened and a culture of mourning, which does nothing to change the present for the better and serves as an invitation to passivity. Arguing about what is unprecedented and what is not is beside the point, since the taxonomy of crimes also does very little to alter the existing order of things. More importantly, in accordance with Ophir's key assertion, we cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering that is taking place right now insofar it can still be lessened. To do so is to mistake superfluity and the production of evil for necessity. It is a failure to discern the potential for change vis-à-vis ongoing catastrophes. Thus, the question of what catastrophes ought to be more 'privileged' or more 'important' is decided from the standpoint of time, which is to say, from the standpoint of prevention or alleviation, i.e., from the standpoint of whether it is too late or not. The structure and modality of time itself now becomes saturated with moral urgency and responsibility. We cannot become moral subjects without *experiencing* disasters as past,

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<sup>253</sup> In this sense, it can be argued that to relate to the catastrophes of the past morally is not to sustain fidelity to remembrance through solemn mourning, but to act morally, in the way that halts or reduces the evils that are still ongoing, *in the present*. Our present behavior is the only true measure of our impossible desire to undo the past, to turn back the clock, to bring back the dead.

present, and future and without understanding which temporal modality allows for change and which does not.

Let me then say more about the notion of urgency before going any further. Later in the book, Ophir discusses, in what I consider to be one of his most achingly honest passages, the relative practical uselessness of the category of ‘Good’ in the excessive presence of ongoing evils and suffering (note that he defines suffering as “an excess of presence”),<sup>254</sup>

a theory of morals that has gone through the ontological turn has no interest in Good. Good neither adds nor subtracts in moral matter. We have no interest in Good, whether it is understood as happiness or as what gives happiness its value and weight, just as it gives value to any other entity [...] Not the Good that isn’t there, but the superfluous loss and suffering, present in their excess, in the imperative. Not the absent Good, not even the absence of Good, but the presence of superfluous evils. Not what is lacking or even the lack itself, but the superfluity of the tormenting lack, the lack that can be fulfilled and removed. Not the generosity or the fairness, but the humiliation and the injury that can be avoided and removed. Not the virtue but the unnecessary brutalization whose results should be stopped. People who have undergone horrible suffering or irreplaceable loss may never again know how to be happy. Memories will haunt them, mistrust toward every person may sabotage every relation they seek to create, torment of mind and body will continue to plague them. The imperative to stand beside them concerns not their future happiness but their *present torture*.<sup>255</sup>

Here Ophir firmly rejects any promise of ‘happiness-to-come,’ a wish to alleviate suffering for the sake of a better future. If this were the case, we would not be revolting against the suffering we are faced with, but rather seeking to bring about a particular future. We tolerate ongoing suffering in the hopes of building a better tomorrow where this suffering will come to an end. We do not attempt to address the particular suffering in question, but to prevent its further emergence in the future. In other words, we seek to alter the world by bypassing a moral expenditure vis-à-vis addressing a concrete instance

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., pp. 439-40.

of individual torment. What Ophir seems to suggest, on the other hand, is that the brutality of excessive suffering is powerful enough to jolt us and that the very being and tangibility of suffering is enough to snap us out of complacency, *as long as a scene of suffering is accessible to us and we are able to take up the position of the addressee and as long as we have a viable theoretical vocabulary to re-describe ourselves as moral agents*. As I will show later, the notion of moral urgency and the activity of judgment are closely and necessarily linked together. According to Ophir, the intolerability of suffering has little to do with Good that promises to come from the future, which is certainly a significant departure from what we might call ‘ethics of the future,’ construing the future as infinitely open and vocal in its seemingly unwarranted promises of a different, better state of affairs. Ophir, however, does not put much stock in the ethical potential of the category of the future *qua* the provenance of Good. Indeed, he admits that “it’s possible, of course, to define Good as the prevention of superfluous suffering and loss. But such a statement would neither add nor subtract, only provide some work for an unemployed concept.”<sup>256</sup>

This is a really important shift of emphasis that we will continue to examine. In calling our attention to the suffering that *can* and *ought* to be stopped or reduced because it is still happening, he thus reinforces the category of urgency. Some people are suffering right now and since their suffering is superfluous, produced, unnecessary, we have a chance of disrupting it. The concept of Good or any utopian vision and messianic thinking does not convey this sense of urgency, for it diverts our attention from the shivering limbs, hungry mouths, and eyes filled with despair. If anything, these concepts

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

neutralize the experiential and affective weight of suffering. In fact, there may not be anything good or happy in store for those who are undergoing or have undergone tremendous suffering. The future plays virtually no role in our attention to their predicament.<sup>257</sup> Once again, since evil is no longer construed as privation, we must address the evil of suffering in its excessive presence and specificity.

Ophir goes on to submit, unsurprisingly, that “urgency is a moral category.”<sup>258</sup> This is the case, as indicated above, because “time has a constitutive role in causing suffering.” In other words, time, which is something we all inhabit, is the central experiential feature of suffering, as we are about to see. For some of us, time is merely the ticking of the clock in the background, while for others time becomes the duration of unbearable suffering. Time either protrudes through the fabric of our experience or fades into the background. If the evil of agonizing time is expressed affectively (the victim’s cry, “No more!”), we are capable of disrupting the painful affect of the victim by offering them some relief, which means we alter their experience of time. Setting aside the view of time as universal, homogenous, and indifferent, preceding and delineating our experience in advance,<sup>259</sup> we embrace affective temporality, the temporality that can be *morally or immorally shaped* by human actions. As Ophir writes, “when what is present

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<sup>257</sup> In this sense, the notion of the impossible also does very little work for Ophir. His claim is simply: it is possible to not suffer or at least to suffer *less*.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>259</sup> According to Kant, time is a pure or *a priori* form of intuition [*Anschauung*], he means that it cannot be deduced from experience [*Erfahrung*]. Which is to say that time is not derived from any object that may be given to us. It is irreducible to any one thing and in this way it is not an “objective determination.” Time gives objects to us immediately, thus ensuring their basic availability to our cognition. Not being locatable in any object, time becomes one of the *a priori* possibilities of our own experience. Thus, Kant concludes that “time is nothing other than the subjective condition under which all intuitions can take place in us.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 163.



causes the one presented with it sorrow, suffering, or damage, or when what is present is the sorrow, the suffering, or the damage itself, the discrete temporalization is preferable....”<sup>260</sup> This is to say, what is needed here is the temporality that frees one from continuous agony. On the contrary, the continuous temporalization or a flowing duration is preferable when we are in the presence of something that brings us joy. We want the source of our enjoyment to persist in existence, such that the time of pleasure never ends at all, just like we desperately need the source of our suffering to disappear.

I consider this to be one of the most important and decisive insights into time available to us today. The question of temporality itself is now drawn into the moral domain, such that we revolt in the face of the temporality that is causing suffering *and* we use a particular vision of time to guide us in our ethical efforts. Suffering is, for Ophir, “the duration of the encounter with the unbearable” and it happens when it is “impossible to disengage from an encounter with casualties.”<sup>261</sup> Indeed, the temporality of suffering is “an incessant duration.” According to these deeply disconsoling words, “this is a chronicle from the Planet Auschwitz. Time there was not what time is on Earth.”<sup>262</sup>

The presence of suffering is so excessive and painful that it stops us in our tracks. Recoiling from the presence of suffering attests to the fact that there is something in IT that fractures our habitual indifference. But how exactly do we revolt against it? While I will expand on this point later, the key here is the creation or fabrication of the discrete or discontinuous “temporalization.” We wedge a gap in the agonizing continuity of suffering even when we simply speak to an other in torment, when we take the ailing

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<sup>260</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 184.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>262</sup> Ka-tzetnik, and Gershon Knispel, *Star of Ashes* (Tel-Aviv: Menorah Publication, 1967), 17.

person for a walk, when we open a window in the sickroom letting the sunshine and the gentle summer breeze rush in. No matter how small the disruption of the unbearable continuity, we exert our agency to alter the sufferer's experience of time. The upshot of this is that human beings can inhabit *radically* different temporalities, which, in turn, are determined or at least acerbated by the social conditions they are in. Thus, temporalization is a *practice*.

I thus want to argue that suffering is the locus where evil is at its most visible and unbearable, which is why, at least for the purposes of this work, I have been using these terms more or less interchangeably. Suffering is a temporal scene where evil shows its ugly figure of senselessness and superfluity. Thus understood, suffering is the experiential kernel of evil *qua* superfluity. Suffering is the ultimate *for nothing* and the death knell for all its justifications. *In other words, ongoing suffering exposes the phenomenon of evil in its superfluity, intolerability, and man-made character, making it not simply one type of evil among others, but its highest point of saturation and, in fact, its paradigm.* To experience suffering, both firsthand and as a witness, is to experience affective time in such a way that allows us to try and disrupt an ongoing evil. To disrupt one is to disrupt the other. Thus, presenting evil as necessary or natural determines our sense of time, time as an indifferent, inexorable succession of events, utterly alien to anything human, such that we remain powerless and resigned in the face of it. This understanding of time is indifferent to the concrete socio-political circumstances of the victims, it is universal, apolitical, 'innocent.' It is the time of 'That too shall pass' that fails to invoke a sense of revolt vis-à-vis that which is intolerable. We need, Ophir tells us, a different understanding of time if we are to experience evil as the scandal of

superfluity. We need to discern what type of time is synonymous with evil, which would be the superfluous, uninterrupted duration of pain.

However, Ophir goes further in situating moral urgency in its relation to the problem of deferral. Let us now look at what he understands by deferral, as it stands in a clear tension with urgency, according to his interpretation. Ophir argues that to defer addressing present suffering is sometimes necessary in order to determine its underlying structural cause or to understand the general structure of suffering so as to respond to it morally. However, it is also to cultivate what Ophir unflinchingly calls a kind of toughness or ‘cruelty.’ Thus,

victims of cruelty are an extreme case (even if not the most extreme) of others we should care for. The care for others gets its concrete expression in the space between urgency and deference. Urgency is always related to a concrete other, near or far, who is in dire need of help. The reflective deferral opens the way for an other that has not yet appeared, that is not yet known, or for evils that have not yet been expressed. Deferral, as we said, obliges us to ignore, even for a while, the evils that befall concrete others; it cultivates toughness that could become cruelty.<sup>263</sup>

To respond to the call of distress is to risk remaining blind to its real cause and thus to perpetuate the suffering, even with the best of intentions, the way Ophir sees it. While it seems that all one can do is to be aware of and keep negotiating this crucial tension between urgency and deferral, at least within the work under discussion, I wonder if Ophir goes far enough in his admirable commitment to the alleviation of present suffering. Recall his words that “people who have undergone horrible suffering or irreplaceable loss may never again know how to be happy.... The imperative to stand beside them concerns not their future happiness but their present torture.” To my mind, the imperative to stand beside one who is suffering demands a kind of moral prohibition

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<sup>263</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 397.

on the prioritization of the *practice* of deferral, i.e., toughness or cruelty vis-à-vis cries for help. It is possible to speculate that the moral agency of urgency and that of deferral are constitutively and experientially different, since the experience of responding to the plight of one single person and the experience of, say, writing a work on the refugee crisis are different as well. However, the lessons and the implications of moral urgency do not end here.

We can illuminate the problem that stems from prioritizing deferral over urgency as follows. Whoever becomes the addressee of the plea for help and responds to it by taking the measures necessary to alleviate this person's suffering is acting both morally and humanly, revolting in the face of someone else's distress and attempting to remove or at least minimize it.<sup>264</sup> In so doing, one correctly situates catastrophes in the cascade of time, he or she responds to the evil in question from the standpoint of the present understood as open to change (that is, our experience of time changes as we transition from grief to joy) seizing the moment before this catastrophe forever drowns in the unchanging waters of the past, forever closed to any intervention, and forever embedded in the bloodstained monolith of history.

We could say that the moral agent snatches this particular production of evil from the fast approaching grip of the past and its illusion of necessity, the illusion turning it into what could not have been otherwise. In other words, this moral agent is driven both by the revolt against suffering and the key link between evil and superfluity, which

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<sup>264</sup> Cf. Ophir's claim that "when one faces suffering, there is no point in dealing with prevention conditions, responsibility for the damage, or compensation. What matters is whether the one called upon to respond can hurry to the rescue of the one who suffers and help him disengage. One should also consider whether such a response might cause further suffering, to the sufferer or to others, now or in the future." *Ibid.*, 338.

amounts either to fragmenting the temporality of pain or condemning the sufferer to a continuous temporality, where all moments are identical in their capacity for torment. As Ophir puts it, “the being of the one-who-suffers is experienced as time, a time of continuous suffering, an expectation for the moment it will cease.”<sup>265</sup> The duration of the suffering is contingent, to a great extent, on our timely and efficient response to it. There are victims who can neither act nor wait. The more time passes and the more we wait, the more superfluous suffering accumulates. It is in this sense, I believe, that urgency is a moral category.

However, Ophir goes on to say, “the concept of justice oscillates between the demand to decide immediately and respond to the call and the demand to suspend judgment and defer the response. To act justly means to act immediately.... to act justly means to take everything into account... an endless reflection and infinite suspension of the decision.”<sup>266</sup> In other words, a moral action is suspended between the immediacy of responding to a suffering other and the need to examine the structural conditions or underlying causes of this evil “in order to ease the suffering of many others, who are more or less abstract.”<sup>267</sup> The suffering other who puts you in the position of the addressee must wait in the hopes that similar suffering can be prevented in the future, which remarkably resembles using a particular scene of suffering as an occasion for research, even if one hopes for its practical applicability. This shift of emphasis of a singular scene of suffering to a future-oriented task is less innocent than it might first appear. Ophir goes on to say that the one dealing with “prevention conditions” must

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 338.

“teach himself and those around him to overcome pity, to repress ruth.”<sup>268</sup> However, I must admit that I am skeptical about the feasibility of easing the suffering of many ‘abstract others’ unless the moral subject in question is the state and we are discussing humanitarian interventions. Which we are not.

“The deferral,” Ophir tells us, “in order to reexamine the order of evils, aiming ultimately at a more just distribution of evils, participates in the existing distribution and reaffirms it in silence. In both directions, the moral deed forces us to readopt a ‘cultured,’ ‘cultivated’ kind of indifference to the suffering of others....”<sup>269</sup> Thus, deferral is a particular kind of thinking about the material conditions of suffering with a moral goal in mind. In refusing to respond to one’s immediate suffering of concrete others, we produce and acquiesce to the duration of their agony. To wait and to postpone does indeed reinforce the existing order of evils and suffering in the world. However, according to Ophir, the promise of deferral is the eventual reduction of suffering not just for one person, but, as it were, across a given society. Thus understood, helping one person is a *temptation*, but not the birth of the moral subject. Contrary to Ophir’s rejection of the idea of a better future vis-à-vis ongoing suffering, he seems to be willing to sacrifice a concrete suffering other precisely for the sake of what’s to come later. The crime of turning away from even one singular suffering other lies at the heart of every deferral. With this in mind, I want to argue that rejecting even one suffering other in the present is to diminish, if not negate, the moral dimension of temporality.

Furthermore, Ophir sees the task of deferral as running counter to one’s moral sensibility, such that the practice of deferral is something that must be learned and

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 398.

cultivated. Its work is to harness one's impulse to act immediately and to yield to temptation to offer relief when faced with suffering. Ophir turns to Nietzsche and his idea of self-overcoming to illustrate his point. As he puts it, "self-overcoming entails cruelty, in particular self-cruelty, an indifferent expenditure of power and an excessive indifference to suffering, the suffering of the one who overcomes himself and others."<sup>270</sup> According to this logic, self-overcoming is necessary on the assumption that to suppress one's impulse to help a person in need causes genuine suffering either in someone else or in the future, the suffering comparable to the one being witnessed.

In short, Ophir claims that the revolutionary, ignoring suffering others for the sake of a sweeping change or a better tomorrow is "cynical about what is and naïve about the relation between the proper and the possible. The benevolent one, the one responding to moral urgency without any reservations, "ignores the social order that produces evils and distributes them... he is naïve about what is and cynical about the relation between the proper and the possible."<sup>271</sup> He thus situates moral comportment between the urgency of responding to someone's plea for relief and the deferral of preventing more suffering in the future. We decide whether it is worth to accumulate and produce the time of suffering by not disrupting it or whether it is worth to defer help.

What I aim to demonstrate in the following section, counter to Ophir, is that the subject shaped by moral urgency is, in fact, the opposite of someone who turns a blind eye to the existing social order and the social production of evils. *Indeed, I position this very subject as the moral paradigm of what it means to inhabit time as expressive of the production of evils, time that is given to us through affects and that is open to human*

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 339.

*disruption.*<sup>272</sup> Once again, a transition from sorrow to joy is a transition from one temporality to another. As Ophir writes, “it is the moral responsibility of the intellectual to be attentive to what is most urgent, and what is most urgent for anyone capable of thinking is to understand the moral condition of a society.”<sup>273</sup> However, I submit that “the moral condition of a society” is not the first and perhaps not even the last task confronting the subject who takes up the challenge of moral urgency. Rather, the challenge is to cultivate the subjectivity wherein one sees the present *qua* the domain of evils before they congeal into the immutable past and to inhabit it accordingly, in the name of moral urgency and the predicament of the weaker one in distress.

In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to further call into question Ophir’s juxtaposition between urgency and deferral, which could be broadly construed as the opposition between acting and thinking. While I will discuss these matters in significantly greater detail in the following chapter, I want to introduce the idea of the non-equivalence of victims. Here I will approach this from the standpoint of moral urgency. What do I mean by non-equivalence? When Ophir speaks of the plea of a suffering other, we are left with the impression that one is overwhelmed by a call of distress, i.e., what is at stake here is a kind of emotional assault on our moral sensibility. Thus, this call for help is radically passionate, forceful, desperate, brimming with the victim’s inability to bear suffering even for one more instant. It is as if the unbearable itself found a voice and it rejects any distinctions or differentiations. In other words, human beings are fundamentally equal in their response to brute pain, such that it

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<sup>272</sup> Here I am certainly not stating that it is *more* important to offer relief to one suffering than to multiple people. Rather, I want to argue that helping only one other in distress is not *less important*. This is the starting point of an ethics I am outlining here.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.



becomes a singular equalizing force. All human beings are the same in their cry for help. However, I want to argue that suffering is inseparable from the socio-political position of the victim, which means that the ‘temptation’ to rush to the unbearably affective plea of the victim is not the whole story. As moral subjects, we ought to differentiate between victims and various instances of suffering as well as what comes in the wake of it, so as to salvage concrete, suffering others from an almost impersonal, undifferentiated pathetic cry for help, the cry that makes us all sound the same, and to position it within concrete, worldly circumstances.

We have to recognize that the mechanisms for the alleviation of suffering have their own patterns and unequal distribution across a wide range of victims. While it all begins with a gut-wrenching plea for relief, a universal, primordial cry for help, we must acknowledge that some victims need help *more urgently* than others. In other words, I am construing urgency not as a blindly affective, emotional ‘tug’ at our moral sensibilities and certainly not as something that precludes thinking, but as something that inevitably differs and demands different types of responses from one situation to the next. To act in the name of moral urgency is a far cry from a thoughtless, hasty reaction. To engage in these moral efforts, we must recognize that an event of suffering does not happen to disembodied subjects in a socio-political vacuum. We must exercise our judgment, learn the circumstances surrounding each instance of suffering, and determine who is facing the greatest neglect and the lowest visibility in the world. We must determine what we are able and *not* able to do in this particular case. This is a matter of a shift of emphasis from the brute fact of pain, which is as theoretically fruitful as a phenomenology of fire, to what happens thereafter. *This is not about who suffers the most. This is about who has*

*the fewest, the scarcest means of redressing this suffering, making it known, and obtaining relief, as well as who is facing the greatest neglect.*

Thus, rearticulating Ophir's notion of moral urgency, we distance it from a pathetic cry for help and rushing to it out of compassionate weakness, especially when deferral holds the promise of futural moral improvements, at least as its defining characteristics. What I am suggesting instead is that urgency, properly understood, encompasses the vicissitudes of personal judgment, assessment of our positionalities and abilities, and, to be sure, thinking.

As an aside, one might wonder, "Is this not utilitarianism in reverse?" It does indeed seem like 'numerical ethics' with its promise to save a greater number of singular, irreplaceable individuals by sacrificing one person is a grief-haunted necessity that stands to reason. The key problem with it, the way I see it, the moral value we have assigned to numerically inspired ethical measures has been decided long ago, such that it is no longer even subject to questioning, and a single individual stands no chance in the course of action that has been millennially taken for granted<sup>274</sup> and refuses any kind of critical re-assessment. Thus, what I am calling into question is the very moral imbalance wherein the fate of a singular other is decided in advance.

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<sup>274</sup> With regard to the practice of condemning the weaker ones to death or worse, let us consider the claim Siebers makes when he submits that "no human group [other than the disabled] has ever been so subject to violence, none so marginalized. In ancient Greece we were left to die on the cold mountain hillsides, in Africa we were food for beasts, in Europe dropped down a well. People forget the Nazis perfected their death machine on the disabled before they moved on to the Gypsies and Jews. Visit an orphanage in any civilized country today, and see who is abandoned there: the deformed, the maimed, the diseased, the mentally impaired." Tobin Anthony Siebers, "My Withered Limb," . " Volume XXXVII, Issue 2: *Disability, Art, and Culture* (Part One), Spring 1998, accessed on 02/24/2017, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0037.202;view=text;rgn=main;xc=1;g=mqrg>

In learning how to assess and respond with moral urgency, we situate suffering in the world, as concretely as possible, such that the question is no longer about a suffering other and multiple more or less abstract others that come from the future, but about *giving expression* to those whose predicament is so dire and urgent that their immediate future is death or what is worse than death. It is about discerning those who can still wait and those who cannot, which means discerning their singular circumstances. We must separate urgency from pure pathos if there is any hope for those facing death or extreme abandonment.<sup>275</sup> This, in a nutshell, is the non-equivalence of victims, as *victims do not suffer equally*.

Now let us go back to Ophir's tension between urgency and deferral. Once again, the tension here is between action, presumably hasty and thoughtless action,<sup>276</sup> and reflection. Reflection arises in order to situate and evaluate the supposedly purely affective responses to a cry for help, as well as to postpone the response. According to Ophir, responding with urgency leaves no room for thinking, since "contemplation requires time and space."<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> See Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* on his notion of 'bare life.' Which, in a nutshell, means bodies stripped of any rights, condemned to social death outside of the political realm. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>276</sup> Cf. Scarry who wants to challenge the view that, when faced with emergency situations, we fall back on 'thoughtless,' knee-jerk habits, routines, and customs. In an emergency, one "can either think or one can act, and given that it is absolutely mandatory that an action be performed, thinking must fall away." In the example of CPR, which could be construed as a mindless, automatic routine, Scarry points out that the practice in question congeals a vast amount of knowledge about the human body and that one must be clear-headed enough to perform this procedure. Indeed, "rather than emergency bringing about the end of thinking, thinking should bring about the end of emergency." Elaine Scarry, *Thinking in an Emergency* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 10.

<sup>277</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 393.

This is precisely the point I want to contest. To acknowledge that victims do not suffer equally is to learn to discern the victim's particular circumstances, to situate their suffering in the world, to exercise judgment when it comes to evaluating the degrees of urgency. This thinking which goes hand in hand with the imperative of moral urgency rescues it from the equalizing force of agonizing affect and *it is precisely through thinking and judging that the moral subject establishes the non-equivalence of victims*. In other words, thinking does not happen in the wake of action, but alongside it. It happens alongside of one's efforts to reduce suffering and, furthermore, it establishes a different relation to victims, such that we are no longer suspended between the idea that everyone suffers equally<sup>278</sup> and pure, overwhelming alterity or the pandemonium of anonymous victims blurred in their immense multiplicity and distress. As long as we are separating thinking and acting under the sign of urgency, we evade confronting victims in their singular circumstances and we fear judging, partly thanks to the ineffable halo surrounding the experience of suffering, that, while suffering as such is intolerable, the

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<sup>278</sup> Cf. Theodor Adorno on the tragedy of existence: "it is deeply dubious to transfer an aesthetic term such as the tragic to the reality and the communal life of human beings and the ethical relationship they have to one another. According to this way of thinking, all thought that takes happiness seriously is deemed shallow, whereas thought is said to be deep if it treats denial and negativity as something positive that gives it meaning. [...] I believe that the position I am trying to explain to you could not be expressed more clearly than by pointing out that it is not prepared to endorse an idea of tragedy according to which everything that exists deserves even to perish because it is finite, and that this perishing is at the same time the guarantee of its infinite nature--I can tell you that there is little in traditional thought to which I feel so steadfastly opposed as this. What I'm saying, then, is that this concept of depth, which amounts to a theodicy of suffering, is itself shallow. [...] It is shallow [...] because it reinforces the idea that failure, death and oppression are the inevitable essence of things--whereas important though all these elements are and, connected as they are to the essence of things, they are avoidable and criticizable, or at any rate the precise opposite of what thinking should actually identify with." Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), pp. 104-5.

situation of some victims is far more urgent than that of others. As I will argue in the following pages, we need to strip suffering of its long-standing aura as a pure, universal, de-contextualized affect if we hope to do justice to those who cannot wait and cannot act on their own behalf.

I submit that moral urgency indexes a suffering other, since we have to judge *who* requires relief with genuine urgency. It thus concerns individuals and singular, embodied others, insofar as its ‘job’ is to expose us to multiple cases of different types of suffering that have not yet passed through the gates of moral urgency and the assessment of my positionality, culminating in the question, “What can *I* do?” “What resources do I have?” “How do I shuffle my schedule?” “What do I have to offer?” The origin of these evaluative and irreducibly personal questions is moral urgency. Therefore, moral urgency is inseparable from the activity of judgment. Ethics without judgment is disingenuous, while judgment without ethics is potentially perilous or cruel.

Furthermore, I submit that the subject of deferral is detached from the reality of concrete scenes of suffering and the irredeemable destitution of a particular person. Without using one’s abilities and judgment, without feeling responsible for the one suffering right in front of you, this subject is only partially human and it chooses to align itself with humanitarian organization, the state’s interventions, charities, activism, and intellectual projects, to free oneself from the essentially human activity of judgment. As a result, the experience of many victims is that of extreme loneliness, resentment, and neglect. Indeed, if the object of ethics is not one specific suffering other, if we agree to be bystanders to someone else’s suffering (after all, helping more people in the abstract, forever opaque future always seems like a better moral valuation), thus severing their

connection to the world and their fellow human beings, this is an ethics of imagined, deferred, depersonalized, indirect actions, an ethics of questionable efficacy. It is an ethics can never redeem and ought not to forget its initial betrayal of the singular weaker one.

The thinking that accompanies urgent response is animated by a new understanding of time, which brings us back to the constellation of evil, production, and ongoing catastrophes. If disasters happen in the present time and they are produced (e.g., they are not halted or alleviated), one must learn to see the present as *porous or plastic*, as having minute spaces or holes into which human action can be injected, which, in turn, involves a particular kind of reflection. Furthermore, the affective nature of temporality means that the duration of affects become the normative measures of produced temporalities, since they signal the moral subject's success or failure to alleviate someone else's suffering. Think, for example, of the heartbreaking 'too late' when we failed to avert a catastrophe or a sigh of deep relief when we stopped something terrible from happening, in the nick of time. Think of the victim's despair when she learns that the efforts to help her were futile and that she remains trapped in her experience of time as torment.

Thus, I want to reiterate that the present is a kind of singular 'element' or medium in which evil has the face of superfluity and malleability, which means that to inhabit the present morally is to learn to discern even minute openings to undermine or halt the unfolding of evil. To look to the past is to endow evil with glacial immutability and to surrender human agency. To look to the future is to turn a blind eye to the concrete existence of evils in the present. Thinking and judging under the sign of moral urgency

makes visible the unequal distribution of recognition and remediation, thus further undermining the equivalence of the victims, for thinking-judging is bound to discover the most neglected one. Perhaps this is the hardest thinking of all, since it goes beyond the pathetic cry for help in order to evaluate each victim's particular circumstances. Should we choose to refuse this evaluation, we have to acknowledge that we are condemning some victims, the victims who cannot wait or endure in their suffering, to torment and possibly death.

In what follows, I will approach this problematic from a different perspective. I will anchor my arguments in Jean Amery's harrowing essay "Resentments," which articulates the subjective experience of the victim. As I will argue, his account deepens and reinforces my claim that the victims are non-equivalent, that an event of suffering does not happen in a socio-political void, and that failing to recognize the singular circumstances of each victim, i.e., how their plight resonated or did not resonate in the world, amplifies their unnecessary suffering. Finally, I will outline a new conception of agency, the agency that neither gives up thinking nor evades the responsibility of disrupting someone's suffering out of moral urgency.

Finally, without learning to discern the many faces of suffering and to respond to this challenge accordingly, without learning to differentiate between the less urgent and the more urgent, and without cultivating the thinking of urgency, one is bound to approach future victims empty-handed, unable to bring together the cries for help that seem to be coming from every direction and the particular circumstances of individual victims, their access to support channels, the people they can mobilize with someone's help, and so on. Failing to learn to inhabit the present morally, with all that it entails,

means the inability to distinguish between brute suffering as an assault on the senses and the body of the sufferer and the circumstances surrounding it. Yet, it is precisely the latter that holds the promise of change, for those who have no resort left.

Furthermore, the victims rejoin the world and their fellow human beings when they see that people can act otherwise in the face of their pain. This is the challenge of agency we must take up if we wish to respond to victims morally. If we choose to do nothing instead, we contribute to their experience of evil as a fundamentally meaningless surplus, the surplus of suffering stemming from indifference, from people's stubborn unwillingness to differentiate between degrees of urgency, building an ethics of hollow efforts and half-measures. Refusing to help a specific suffering other in the present is to reassert the primacy of natural, apolitical, inexorable time, the same time that glosses over all evils and promises, ever so mockingly and incessantly, to heal all wounds.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **The Morality of Resentments & Truth-Haunted Affectivity**

The suspension of judgment is a form of torture.

—Adi Ophir

Why? ... Why Me? ... Why—ultimately—Me? ... Do you really imagine you can account for Me? Totally, infallibly, inevitably account for Me?

—Samuel French

The phenomenon we will be examining in this chapter is suffering itself, first conceptualized structurally, in terms of its defining characteristics, and then narrated from the victim's perspective, followed by a discussion of the means to redress it and the role of moral agency in it. Let us recall that Ophir understood suffering as a type of evil and that I amplified his claim by arguing that, in suffering, evil as production appears at



its most visible and exerts the most power on the human psyche. Thus, the following analysis of suffering is also the deepening of the problem of evil, the two being inextricably yoked together. Each situation between the sufferer and the addressee is presented here, due to the emphasis on alleviating this scene of suffering, through the lens of the present as the domain where evils can be stopped or minimized, i.e., through the lens of the present and affectivity temporality. What I hope to accomplish here is both give voice to one of the most poignant, yet lesser-known intellectual figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Amery, and draw on his harrowing experiences of torture and abandonment, coupled with Ophir's re-articulation of the problem of evil, to draw far-reaching moral conclusions concerning the moral coexistence of victims and their fellow human being as well our freedom as such. The freedom that perhaps we first feel, aching, when we encounter a suffering other, perhaps a distant friend who is currently in the dire straits, and we, for whatever reason, failed them, wishing that we had acted otherwise and knowing that *we could have*.

My discussion begins with an explication of an event of trauma, the way Freud understands it, since this construal remains highly influential to this day, to the point where the Freudian traumatic temporality became synonymous with trauma itself. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud's primary example is the soldiers returning from the First World War, returning with profound changes both in body and mind. These soldiers, previously enjoying good mental and physical health, were now suffering from repeated nightmares and flashbacks. Freud begins to formulate the hypothesis that the traumatic experiences in question are due to "excitations from outside which are powerful

enough to break through the protective shield.”<sup>279</sup> As he goes on to say, “it seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli.”<sup>280</sup> In our daily life, we are protected from overwhelming external events both by our physical resources to minimize the assault on our bodies, but also by the psychic mechanisms that mitigate the energy caused by stimuli. The trauma, according to Freud, is thus the breach [*Durchbruch*] of our psychic and cognitive protective mechanisms. This breach of our protective barriers makes the traumatized subject relive the traumatic experience as an attempt to “master the stimulus retrospectively.”<sup>281</sup> The victim’s mind is attempting to repeat the initial experience of the trauma so that it can be experienced as a less threatening and less overwhelming event and be integrated into the subject’s consciousness, thus de-fanging the traumatic scene through assimilation. Thus, in its lasting destructive influence, “trauma is somehow simultaneously recognized and unrecognized, or recognized as unrecognizable, and therefore cannot be confronted directly.”<sup>282</sup>

In other words, since the original traumatic event is so alien to our mental capacities, it becomes lodged in our mind as a kind of foreign body, something that the mind tries to either expel or assimilate, in vain, through repetition. Which is to say, “the temporal peculiarity making an event or experience traumatic is the circumstance that trauma *remains* traumatizing in such a way that the pastness of trauma continues to

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<sup>279</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), PDF pagination.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, PDF pagination.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, PDF pagination.

<sup>282</sup> Cathrine Bjørnholt Michaelsen, “Tracing a Traumatic Temporality: Levinas and Derrida on Trauma and Responsibility,” *Levinas Studies*, Volume 10, 2015, pp. 43-77, especially p. 45.

proceed as if from the future.”<sup>283</sup> Traumatic temporality traps the sufferer between past and future, chaining them to the opaque, inaccessible moment of a deadly overwhelming, without the possibility of refuge. As Caruth explains in *Unclaimed Experience*, the mind’s attempts to master that which exceeds all its capacities through repetition is doomed to fail, for the wounds of the mind do not heal the way physical wounds do. Indeed, “the wound of the mind... the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world... is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that... imposes itself repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.”<sup>284</sup>

Thus, according to this highly prominent view that continues to hold sway even to this day, trauma is an overwhelming event that continues to haunt the victim, for its residue cannot be assimilated into consciousness, the natural order of time, and one’s sense of the world. This foreign body splintering our mind makes us suffer precisely because we cannot integrate it, because it does not ‘belong’ with anything human, leading the mind to futile attempts to expel it through repeated nightmares. Consequently, the victim suffers because of a foreign, extra-linguistic trace. Indeed, beyond postulating the existence of an alien splinter in our psyche, the event of trauma remains empty, contentless, forever shrouded in ineffability. Thus, the event of trauma eludes our grasp and analysis, becoming impenetrable, inevitable, obscure, thereby precluding any intervention.

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>284</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), PDF pagination.

Let me now turn to Ophir's examination of suffering, often coinciding with the traumatic, which will prove to be distinctly and fruitfully different from the Freudian model, postulating the radical separation of thinking and suffering, since the kernel of trauma remains inaccessible to thought. Indeed, we will transition from trauma viewed as a foreign body that breaches our protective barriers and causes suffering due to its failure of integration to the structure and the experience of suffering, the structure and experience that can be articulated and examined. As we are about to see, Ophir describes the event of suffering from the standpoint of time, agency, and duration, drawing into its orbit the attempts to alleviate this particular torment. He thus strips the time of suffering of its quasi-mystical, ineffable aura, locating the unbearable in the very fabric of our articulable experience.

What I will discuss now is the problem of suffering seen as a type of evil that is open, by virtue of its unfolding right now, in the present, to intervention, change, and alleviation. It is about suffering seen through the lens of social production and superfluity, where what is man-made can and *ought to* be unmade. Indeed, as we will see shortly, suffering will now become the very expression of this superfluity, the superfluity of evil as it is experienced by and given to human beings, i.e., the way it forever reshapes and mutilates the human psyche. Indeed, the evil of suffering in its irreducible superfluity will be addressed at length in the final chapter.

For Ophir, "suffering is the duration of the encounter with the unbearable... the unbearable is precisely what one bears when suffering, what one suffers from."<sup>285</sup> Thus, suffering is construed as an intolerable excitation that is fundamentally temporal and

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<sup>285</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 257.

durational, the latter becoming its central feature. Contrary to Freud, it does not simply rupture the natural flow of time, causing a kind of enigmatic rift and twisting it into a kind of inevitable, frozen temporality intolerable to human beings. While suffering and time are forever twinned, we reiterate that temporalization is a practice.

Furthermore, Ophir tells us, “suffering begins when a sharp sense of *too much* comes upon the one who is overcome by the feeling *I have had enough*, i.e., when something inside someone cries out, “No more, stop it!” The presence of intense excitation turns into the presence of surplus that cannot be disposed of,<sup>286</sup> at least not without someone’s intervention and an offer of relief. If evil is understood as superfluity or surplus that is socially produced and distributed, we see that suffering—more so than the other types of evil that Ophir discusses in his work<sup>287</sup>—is synonymous with the experience of this very surplus, precisely because it is the duration that ought not to be and that has no justifications, the duration defined by its overwhelming, irredeemable senselessness. Suffering is the *too much* in the face of which one is completely powerless, unable to alter their experience of time of their own volition, abandoned and forgotten by the world. In suffering and in its sense of *too much*, the human threshold of the tolerable comes to light.

Suffering, Ophir goes on to say, is a communicative situation, in the sense that it is often visible *to* someone, that the sufferer addresses someone, thus creating the position of the addressee. The desperate plea ‘Do something about it!’ can be either involuntary (e.g., a cry of pain) or a deliberate attempt to make someone care. The emphasis on doing or practical intervention is not accidental here. In Ophir’s words, “the

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Such as damage, loss, disappearance, etc. See Ophir, *The Order of Evils*.

one who cries for help has no time to give meaning; she is interested in relief, not interpretation. The one who answers the cry for help must give a causal, immediate interpretation, has to answer questions such as.... ‘From what should the sufferer be disengaged in order to alleviate her suffering?’”<sup>288</sup>

Put otherwise, Ophir refuses to see suffering as an occasion for an interpretation, for a story (‘All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story’) that would give it meaning, that would explain *why* someone is suffering. Here he agrees with Emmanuel Levinas who defines suffering as being fundamentally ‘for nothing.’<sup>289</sup> Indeed, as Levinas succinctly puts it, “suffering is the impossibility of nothingness” or “an absence of all refuge.”<sup>290</sup> The hermeneutics of suffering would justify the pain of the sufferer by telling them that their pain is part of a greater whole that needs to be affirmed (for instance, seen from the perspective of personal development, the pain one is currently undergoing could be interpreted as contributing to the future strength of the person’s character) or that there is an otherworldly reward awaiting them at the end of the journey. Ophir thus asserts that the hermeneutics of suffering is the birthplace of ideology. Here I understand ideology as a framework that naturalizes something, i.e., frames it as necessary and therefore beyond human control and beyond change. Ideology turns suffering into necessity, thus taking us as far as possible from understanding the evil of suffering as production.

Let me, however, return to the question of the temporality of suffering before proceeding any further. As Ophir writes, “the content of suffering merges with the

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<sup>288</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 265.

<sup>289</sup> Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *Entre-Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 93.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 69.

impossibility of detaching oneself from suffering.... and this impossibility is always a question of time....” He goes on to say that “in suffering this temporalization is intensified and presenced: the being of the one-who-suffers is experienced as time, a time of continuous suffering, an expectation for the moment it will cease.”<sup>291</sup> Once again, this is to say that pain is experienced as pure duration, as something that refuses to go away or allow for any change.

“Suffering as temporalization,” Ophir continues, “expels the sufferer from time’s ordinary imperceptible progress and bifurcates the flow of time.”<sup>292</sup> What this means is that we rarely pay attention to or experience the flow of time in our ordinary engagement with the world. Time recedes into the background as we go on about our daily business and we often forget to keep track of it. Time invades our experience precisely through powerful affects, joys or sorrows, to name but a few, echoing the Spinozist passion of time discussed earlier. Time becomes properly human and acquires an experiential reality when it is given to us through affects. When we are not suffering, we are sheltered from experiencing the cruelty of pure agonizing duration by our habitual dwelling in the world. To sum this up, Ophir construes suffering, however brutal or intense, not as an obscure breach in the flow of time, but rather as intensifications, protrusions, and prickles of time, time that goes from a kind of neutral, unnoticeable background of our daily affairs to an unbearable duration.

If evil is brought back into this world, if we are urged to study its concrete manifestations and modes of production and distribution, so is suffering and its temporality. This means that we all can disrupt someone’s suffering in concrete, even

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<sup>291</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 273.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

mundane ways, by wedging a gap into the homogeneity of its duration, by giving a qualitatively different content to the succession of identical moments keeping you in the claws of agony. For example, if you know someone who is suffering from a serious illness, a heartache, or a terrible loss, taking that person for a walk on a nice day would be an interruption of their time of suffering, such that their sense of time becomes discontinuous, such that they are able to disengage from the unbearable, if only briefly. This taking-for-a-walk acquires a completely new meaning now vis-à-vis the intolerable excitation of suffering. In so doing, you are taking them away, however briefly, from the unbearable duration of suffering, thus rupturing their wounding sense of time. If only for a moment, it is no longer the experience of suffering alone that is flooding their senses. Through interruption, the senses are finally free enough to experience something else. Now it is also the voice of a friend, the leaves shivering gently in the summer breeze, conversation or compassionate and understanding silence that fill this person's experience. Which means that you have brought the production of this particular instance of evil to a halt.

Let us take seriously the fact that the one-who-suffers experiences time in a thoroughly different and unbearable way. I believe that the moral response demanded by continuous suffering is the practice of disruption. It is forcefully, purposefully fragmenting and fracturing temporality itself so as to interrupt someone's suffering. Barring the complete removal of traumatic situation, the suffering is always there. Interrupting it as often as possible makes it a little closer to bearable. Thus, the new moral imperative, stemming from the conjunction of the radical here-and-now and an instance of suffering, assumes the form of disruption.



Taking stock of Ophir's decisive insights into the role of time in the production of evil, I want to dedicate the rest of this chapter to the discussion of the particular victim's subjective experience, emphasizing the role of time, affect, and fellow human beings vis-à-vis the victim in question. In other words, I will let the victim himself speak, without ever minimizing the gut-wrenching harshness and poignancy of his words. I will examine this victim's account through the lens of the present as the domain where evils can be stopped or minimized. Taking seriously the subjective victim's experience and applying the theoretical tools Ophir offered us to the problematic in question, we will find that the experience in question hides uneasy truths in its aura of the supposedly irrational, pathological affectivity, the truths about the nature of suffering as its pain emanates far beyond the initial event of torment and about human agency, whose kernel lies not deep within one's interiority, within the addressee's heart, but rather as I will argue, in the experience of the victim him- or herself.

However, I shall to begin this discussion by a detour, necessary for contextualizing the problem of victimhood and equivalence, thus giving it its proper specificity. Following the excellent work *The Empire of Trauma* by Didier Fassin, I would like to turn to the idea we have already seen, that of 'the equivalence of victims,' and its relation to the indifference *to* suffering. Fassin's analysis centers on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the central question being, "Why is it that the difference between the Palestinian 'stone-throwers,' who turn out to be young kids, and the armed Israeli soldiers gets erased when seen through the humanitarian lens?" Indeed, the accounts given by the humanitarian organizations on this conflict, adamantly refuse to take sides, construing every party of the conflict as a victim in his own right, equally deserving of

remediation and therapeutic treatment, and sidestepping their particular circumstances entirely. However, what allows us to position the adult armed soldiers and the unarmed kids as equal victims, without considering the moral genesis of their current victimhood and their particular situations? What is it about the category of victimhood that dissolves the differences and the specificities surrounding each particular sufferer, such that they become essentially indistinguishable from one another?<sup>293</sup>

As the organization Médecins du Monde asserts in their report *Israeli and Palestinian Civilians: Victims of an Unending Conflict*, “there are no good or bad victims.”<sup>294</sup> In other words, moral evaluation and differentiation have no place when it comes to sufferers. One sufferer’s needs are no more important or special than the other’s. Victimhood thus becomes something abstract and universal, neither good nor bad, devoid of any specificity and differences. The problem is, as Didier points out, “with regard to the second Intifada, Médecins du Monde does not question the imbalance of power, the illegality of the Israeli state’s occupation, or the violent oppression of the Palestinian population...”<sup>295</sup> It short-circuits such facts that some (unarmed) victims are much more prone to be traumatized, that some people simply happen to live in a warzone while others made the choice to there, that the radical imbalance of power defies justice, meaning that some victims stand on the side of justice, as those who, for instance, fight

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<sup>293</sup> To approach this question from a clinical perspective, Malabou’s description of a victim outside of remediation, “a figure outside of time, without last wishes,” speaks to the key difference among victims. Pathological plasticity is “a plasticity that does not repair, a plasticity without recompense or scar, one that cuts the thread of life in two or more segments that no longer meet...” Catherine, Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Cambridge, Polity, 2016), pp. 2-3, 16.

<sup>294</sup> Didier Fassin, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry Into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 206.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

against the invasion of their own land.

Once again, what is it then that allows one to assert the symmetry between these clearly different victims? The bigger problem, one I will keep revisiting throughout this chapter, is the view positing the universal vulnerability of all bodies. According to Cavarero, “the uniqueness that characterizes the ontological status of humans is also in fact a constitutive vulnerability, especially when understood in corporeal terms.”<sup>296</sup> Indeed, as MacIntyre puts, our entire history of philosophy attempted to disavow human vulnerability and “the connections between them and our dependence on others” to shore up the vision of a rational and independent subject.<sup>297</sup> The more specific response suggested here by Fassin has to do with the clinical vocabulary of trauma, greatly popularized in our every world, which ties into the greater emphasis on vulnerability that gained a lot of traction in the contemporary academic circles. If a body is construed as universally fragile, the injury to this body is hardly anything more than a reminder of everyone’s shared mortality and affliction. To quote Fassin once more, “at the boundary between psychiatric diagnosis (the all-embracing clinical category of post-traumatic stress) and popular thinking (the experience of being traumatized by a serious incident), trauma ultimately becomes what testifies to the universality of suffering and thus to the equivalence of victims.”<sup>298</sup> In other words, the mere existence of the trace of violence marks the point where we stop examining the conditions surrounding it, preceding it, and stemming from it. It is the trace alone that matters and becomes the center of therapeutic

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<sup>296</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>297</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 10.

<sup>298</sup> Fassin, *The Empire Of Trauma*, 207.

and even political attention.<sup>299</sup> The concrete, living *who* becomes the static, impersonal *what*: an essentially interchangeable, featureless organism impacted by ‘a serious incident.’ Which is to say, the equivalence of victims is solidified by our focus on the physiological, observable traces of injury, which is something that all human bodies *could* potentially be subject to. To go back to Didier’s example, both the Israeli soldiers and the Palestinian stone-throwers display the same post-traumatic symptoms, such as nightmares, hyper-vigilance, and even bed-wetting. They are, indeed, equal in their symptoms and, as long as we remain focused on the traces of violence potentially and, in some cases, actually shared by all universally vulnerable bodies, we neglect to examine the specific conditions surrounding each event of suffering. In encountering the victims of violence, it is the firmly established focus on post-traumatic sequelae that makes all of them essentially the same.

Stepping aside from the realm of politics, yet remaining in its proximity, what I take to be at issue here is the radically equalizing force of suffering and human finitude. As many of us learned from the TV show *Game of Thrones*, the haunting words, spoken in the dead fantasy language, *Valar morghulis*, translate into the undeniable, even trivial fact that “All men must die.” Indeed, it stands to reason that a sudden confrontation with one’s finitude or going through the scorching intensity of pain initiates us into the human condition, at the heart of which lies the fundamental equality of each and every one of us,

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<sup>299</sup> Worse yet, “many advocates of the concept of cultural trauma conflate the psychological challenges that all human beings face in their everyday life, especially in the process of maturation, with the extraordinary psychological ordeal encountered, for example, by victims of extreme violence.” Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck, “Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma (or How I Learned to Love the Suffering of Others without the Help of Psychotherapy),” eds. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (New York: de Gruyter, 2008), 236.

the ultimate equality in the face of death. A sudden prick of a needle abundantly demonstrates the vulnerability and organic equivalence of our bodies. That being said, the essay we will be examining now, the essay describing the internal or subjective experience of the victim, demands something very different. It demands the recognition of the *specificity* of this particular suffering as it is received by others and the world itself, keeping in mind that the recognition in question cannot be abstracted from the socio-political realm. It thus demands a more nuanced understanding of suffering as something *concrete, social, and embodied*.

The testimony to suffering we will be discussing is Amery's essay "Resentments." Born in Vienna, of Jewish origin, Amery was studying literature and philosophy when the Nazis came to power in Germany. After the annexation of Austria into the Nazi Germany in 1938, Amery first fled to France and then to Belgium, where he joined the Resistance. It was there where he was arrested by the Gestapo for disseminating anti-Nazi literature. Even though Amery was well aware of what was transpiring in the concentration camps, no amount of information could prepare him for his own experience of torture during the interrogation, perhaps most poignantly encapsulated by his words, "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured."<sup>300</sup> Once the interrogators realized that he had no useful information, he was promptly sent off to Auschwitz. Having endured a year in Auschwitz III, the Buna-Monowitz labor camp, he was eventually liberated in 1945. In all of his subsequent texts, Amery remained steadfast

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<sup>300</sup> Jean Amery, "Torture," *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 34.

in his refusal to endow his singular suffering with any kind of meaning and to open the door to the possibility of an easy redemption.<sup>301</sup>

The essay “Resentments” is thus both a testimony to and reflections of a survivor on what it means to do justice to one’s experiences, one’s past, and the immense difficulty it entails. Amery goes much further than simply stating that bearing a witness to one’s past suffering is a process of re-experiencing the loss or the harrowing difference between the (pre- and post-catastrophic) past and the present. As we will see, the radicality of his position amounts to positing and insisting on a kind of *moral time*, which we can preliminarily define as the temporality of injustice and irreparability. However, as I will argue later, moral time is not just about saving the event of suffering from the clutches of forgetting in order to commemorate its moral truth, but also about holding on to a particular vision of agency or, more precisely, to a specific relationship between the victim and others in the proximity to the former. As Sebald elucidates, Amery’s writings are markedly different from the prevailing accounts of the horrors during the Nazi Germany in several important ways,

rather than being abstract accounts of the victims of National Socialism, accounts which only too easily acknowledged a monstrous liability, the essays written by Améry at this time about his personal past and present contain insights, based on the most direct experience, into the irreparable condition of those victims, and it is from such insights alone that the true nature of the terror visited on them can be extrapolated with some precision. It is part of the psychic and social condition of the victim that he cannot receive compensation for what was done to him.<sup>302</sup>

In other words, the directness of Amery’s experience with the terror of the Holocaust allowed him to single out and capitalize on one fundamental feature of the victim’s

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<sup>301</sup> See Lillian Kremer, *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 68.

<sup>302</sup> W. G., Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2012), 9.

predicament, i.e., the sense of the irreparable, of the wounding rupture of one's life-trajectory, a tear in, and an aberration of, life-time. Thus far, we are reminded of Freud's theory of trauma construed as a foreign object that pierces our protective barriers and continues to cause suffering precisely because we cannot assimilate it and thus return to our pre-traumatic past, paralyzed by the feeling of loss and the irremediable.

However, I want to complicate this account that sees an event of suffering as an irreparable break between past and future (note that taking this structure formally, the same can be said about the experience of love, such that the world appears transformed after we meet our special other) in the following way. It is undoubtedly true that the experience of the wound singularizes or distances the victim from the rest of the world that is only too eager to forget someone's unseemly pain, while the sufferer is haunted by a terrible splinter fracturing their mind and preventing them from resuming the life as they once knew it. Indeed, "the surviving victim cannot move on in/with a society that has not recognized the moral horror of the crime committed in its name and which has been tolerated by the masses."<sup>303</sup> Yet, it is important to note that even when the world is not allowed to forget about someone's suffering, it tries to equalize and dissolves one's suffering into the fundamental feature of the human condition, into something that everyone, at least *potentially*, is subject to, for the sake of moving forward without any hindrances. In other words, while the victim suffers from their bodily and psychic wounds, he or she feels estranged from the world precisely because the world uses these very wounds, these seemingly neutral traces of violence, to place the sufferer in the relation of equivalence with all other victims, thus robbing them of their specificity. It is

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<sup>303</sup> Thomas Brudholm, "Revisiting Resentments: Jean Amery and the Dark Side of Forgiveness and Reconciliation," *Journal of Human Rights*, 5:7–26, 2006.

as though the world admonishes the victim, “If you think your suffering is special, think again. Vulnerability lives in all of us, so play nice and stop being a pest to the rest of us.”<sup>304</sup> Thus, while suffering grows roots in and preys on the body,<sup>305</sup> there is still something about it that resists equalization. Something deep and visceral within us revolts when we attempt to place fully armed Israeli soldiers and stone-throwing kids on the same moral continuum, erasing all context in the name of fairly identical post-traumatic symptoms.

Returning to the specificity of Amery’s own torture, trapped in the death machinery of the Holocaust, he goes on to assert that “the persecution and extermination of a largely assimilated minority, as planned and put into practice in the German Reich, is singular and irreducible.... in the last resort the question is not so much one of constructing a plausible etiology of terror as of achieving some ultimate understanding of what it means to be marked out as a victim....”<sup>306</sup> Thus, we encounter the question of inhabiting the world after one’s basic sense of normalcy, continuity, and justice has been shattered. Furthermore, Amery tells us that his goal is to understand and thus make

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<sup>304</sup> Cf. Judith Butler on precariousness. As she writes, “there ought to be recognition of precariousness as a shared condition of human life (indeed, as a condition that links human and non-human animals), but we ought not to think that the recognition of precariousness masters or captures or even fully cognizes what it recognizes.... To say that a life is injurable, for instance, or that it can be lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death, is to underscore not only the finitude of a life (that death is certain) but also its precariousness (that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life). Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 13-14. Thus, precariousness becomes the fundamental feature shared by human and non-human beings, a kind of ontological similarity that promises an ethics fully cognizant of our fragility.

<sup>305</sup> Speaking of his experience of torture at the hands of the Gestapo, Amery writes, “only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete.... the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that.” See Amery, “Torture,” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 33.

<sup>306</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *ibid.*



intelligible what it means to be a victim, the task that elevates the inner experience of victimhood from something purely affective, thought-defying, and ineffable to a discursive event.

These reflections on what it means to be a victim center around the question of temporality. While most people tend to inhabit the present and the future, the victim's gaze is fixed on the past, rejecting the march of the present. As Ben-Shai writes, "the experience of the passage of time therefore becomes torturous, like being stretched on the wheel. The split in his personality, between survivor and victim, grows steadily like an unbeatable tumor."<sup>307</sup> Indeed, the lives of the victims of terror are essentially defined by the memory of their torment, substantially severing their connection to the present. As Améry states, "the fact that memory can hardly be endured—memory not only of moments of terror but also of a more or less untroubled time before them—is a problem which to a high degree determines the mental state of victims of persecution."<sup>308</sup> Thus, both the moments of terror *and* the impossibility of returning to the pre-traumatic past are identified as the sources of one's torment. As we will see, there is more to this source of lasting pain. The traumatic event that Améry is describing is no longer seen as that which eludes consciousness, thinking, and memory. But we will go back to the question of temporality shortly.

The essay begins with a description of the author's occasional travels through the thriving land of the postwar Germany. The postwar country is the land of economic

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<sup>307</sup> Roy Ben-Shai, *Moral Pathology A Philosophical Study of Jean Améry and a Pathos-Based Approach to Moral Thinking*, accessed on 07/27/2017,

[https://www.academia.edu/1820842/Moral\\_Pathology\\_A\\_philosophical\\_study\\_of\\_Jean\\_Am%C3%A9ry\\_and\\_a\\_pathos-based\\_approach\\_to\\_moral\\_thinking](https://www.academia.edu/1820842/Moral_Pathology_A_philosophical_study_of_Jean_Am%C3%A9ry_and_a_pathos-based_approach_to_moral_thinking)

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

prosperity, democratic stability, and political moderation, in stark contrast to its recent regime of terror and its monstrously grotesque excesses. However, Amery admits that he feels uncomfortable in this deceptively peaceful land, as he belongs to the ever-decreasing number of the victims of National Socialism. He remembers the crimes of Germany only too well to be reassured by its current peace and prosperity. Thus, “Ameryan resentments resemble resentment proper because they are fired by a sense of the intolerable or injurious character of the way in which the post-war world, the German society in particular, allowed or facilitated an active forgetting of and reconciliation with the Nazi past.”<sup>309</sup> He remains a victim, unwelcome in his memories and his resentments, in the country that attempts to overcome its infamous, exceedingly disastrous past. Indeed, Amery writes, “I speak as a victim and examine my resentments.”<sup>310</sup> The resentments that contain important moral truths.

It is worth noting that Amery wants to distance himself from the realm of political polemics. Instead, he says,

what matters to me is the description of the subjective state of the victim. What I can contribute is the analysis of the resentments, gained from introspection. My personal task is to justify a psychic condition that has been condemned by moralists and psychologists alike. The former regard it as a taint, the latter as a kind of sickness. I must acknowledge it, bear the social taint, and first accept the sickness as an integrating part of my personality and then legitimize it.<sup>311</sup>

His endeavor will thus concern rescuing affects from their aura of ineffability and irrationality, where thinking is pitted against emotions, in the hopes of providing a kind of affective logic. Which is to say, affects hide the truth that runs counter to what is established and uncontested, to the order of the world as we know it, the world where

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<sup>309</sup> Brudholm, “Revisiting Resentments,” *Journal of Human Rights*, 15.

<sup>310</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 63.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

time heals all wounds and any victim that thinks that their suffering is more urgent or special is swiftly accused of arrogance. It harbors the truth that is too harsh and uncomfortable to be 'allowed' to shed its guise of irrational affectivity and admitted as intellectual currency into the proper rational discourse. In short, the truths of affects remain pariahs.

His resentments,<sup>312</sup> Amery goes on to tell us, did not originate within him overnight. However, we remember that his overwhelming feeling of injustice did not begin with the first shattering blow of Amery's torturer either. Paradoxically, it did not fully originate in the moment of physical agony, contrary to what one might think. His resentments did not come to be on the day he left the last of his concentration camps nor did he sense their emergence during the time when Germany, due to its unimaginable crimes, was regarded by other nations with hatred and contempt. At first, Amery felt at home in the world where Germany was rendered powerless, treated with contempt by other nations, and where the category of collective guilt has struck roots. Germany's unquestionable guilt was neither minimized nor was the country absolved of its responsibility.

However, this relatively peaceful state of affairs did not last. As Amery points out, "in the following years there was less and less talk of remorse. First, the pariah Germany was accepted into the community of nations, after that it was courted, finally it had to be dispassionately reckoned with in the power game."<sup>313</sup> The general mindset of

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<sup>312</sup> Late 16th century: from obsolete French *resentir*, from *re-* (expressing intensive force) + *sentir* 'feel' (from Latin *sentire*). The early sense was 'experience (an emotion or sensation),' later 'feel deeply,' giving rise to 'feel aggrieved by.' American Oxford Dictionary.

<sup>313</sup> Amery, "Resentments," *At the Mind's Limits*, 66.

the Germans changed as well. Amery was struck by the pervasive desire on the part of the Germans to ‘overcome’ their unfortunate past, abide by the policy of reparations, and wipe the slate clean. He could not help but see, “peering through the conciliatory wave, the same conformist and quietist indifference of the society that only yesterday joined ranks around, or at least submissively complied with, the goal of expelling him and other vermin of his sort.”<sup>314</sup> When guilt disappears, so does atonement. Furthermore, the absence of guilt meant the absence of sin, at least in the current state of affairs. The minority of the people who were still holding on to the past and to their singular wounds, such as Amery himself, were seen as acting purely out of “morally condemnable hate.”<sup>315</sup> In other words, “relentless, backward-looking resentment must be the sign of some kind of moral failure or irrationality on behalf of its holder.”<sup>316</sup>

It is this minority that Amery found himself in alliance with and it was the birth of his overwhelming resentments and his rebellion against absolving Germany of its crimes. Indeed, “since I neither can nor want to get rid of them, I must live with them and am obliged to clarify them for those against whom they are directed.”<sup>317</sup> Amery’s resentments began to raise their fierce, stubborn, indecorous heads. Resentment, as Butler poignantly tells us, is closely linked to a sense of good and evil, functioning as “a weapon, put into our hands by nature, against injury, injustice, and cruelty.”<sup>318</sup> In so

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<sup>314</sup> Ben-Shai, “In Sickness and in Health: Nietzsche, Améry, and the Moral Difference,” accessed on 08/10/2017, [https://www.academia.edu/7305483/In\\_Sickness\\_and\\_In\\_Health\\_Nietzsche\\_Am%C3%A9ry\\_and\\_the\\_Moral\\_Difference](https://www.academia.edu/7305483/In_Sickness_and_In_Health_Nietzsche_Am%C3%A9ry_and_the_Moral_Difference) .

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>316</sup> Brudholm, “Revisiting Resentments,” *Journal of Human Rights*, 11.

<sup>317</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 67.

<sup>318</sup> Joseph Butler, *Sermons by Joseph Butler, D.C.L. Sometime Lord Bishop of Furham* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), 119.

doing, he wanted to explain the inner life of the sufferers to the world that refused to accept and properly recognize victims as victims, as those who felt themselves to be at odds with the universal human condition resistive to any differentiation and asymmetry.

To be sure, the last, famously scathing word on resentment belongs to Friedrich Nietzsche,

resentment defines such creatures who are denied genuine reaction, that of the deed, and who compensate for it through an imaginary revenge.... The resentful person is neither sincere, nor naïve, nor honest and forthright with himself. His soul squints; his mind loves hiding places and back doors; everything concealed gives him the feeling that it is his world, his security, his balm...<sup>319</sup>

According to Nietzsche, resentment is the ultimate sign of feebleness, dishonesty, and psychically arrested humanity, which amounts to the difference between the strong and the weak. Resentment is the affect of the slave, which is, admittedly, one of the worst things Nietzsche could have said. To be sure, it is something to be resisted and overcome, since the only emotion that ought to accompany resentment is shame. As Ben-Shai explains,

Nietzsche used the term *ressentiment* to characterize what he called ‘slave morality.’ Slave morality is a moral ideology that was first developed by Jesus and his disciples under conditions of slavery, and later, following the overturning of the Roman Empire by the Catholic Church, became the dominant ideology of the Western world. For Nietzsche, slave-morality, like every other value-system, is in fact a power-mechanism which employs ideals and values as weapons.<sup>320</sup>

Indeed, “for Nietzsche... the resentful victim would then be someone who, due to an innate weakness, is unable to act upon the injuries he has suffered,”<sup>321</sup> as if the sufferer’s

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<sup>319</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), PDF pagination.

<sup>320</sup> Ben-Shai, *Moral Psychology*, 84.

<sup>321</sup> Panu Minkkinen, “*Ressentiment* as Suffering,” *Law & Literature*, Vol. 19, Issue 3, 520.

will and self-mastery have not been already shattered. In setting out to delineate the victim's rejoinder to the Nietzschean condemnation of resentment as the ultimate expression of powerlessness by asserting the moral truth of this affect, Amery is confronted by yet another accusation. According to modern psychology, the victims of political persecution as sick and 'warped,' their perspective woefully distorted, they are too backwards for the rest of the world. Indeed, according to Minow, there is "striking prevalence of therapeutic language in contemporary discussions of mass atrocities."<sup>322</sup> As psychologists would have us believe, the inner state of the victim harbors no truths, since only the healthy mind is capable of perceiving things clearly. The traumatized are not allowed into the community of truth because they are allegedly too concerned with themselves, too involved with their sickness, and certainly unreliable in their moral vision. Indeed,

this means that the moral emotions or emotions responding to perceived moral wrongs are sometimes seen only as evidence of trauma or as "health effects." When victims voicing their anger (for example with a certain amnesty policy or as a result of societal expectations that they will forgive or forget) are treated as victims of an illness, a new offense may be added on top of the original injury. The pathologization of anger facilitates "blindness" to the moral demands and critiques that may be inherent to victims' anger after mass atrocity.<sup>323</sup>

Yet, Amery does not shy away from taking up the position of the warped state in question, affirming his 'warped state' "as a form of the human condition that morally as well as historically is of a higher order than that of healthy straightness."<sup>324</sup> Thus, he admits that his position is indeed distorted and askew, yet it is also fundamentally *moral*. He goes on to say, "I... am not traumatized, but rather my spiritual and psychic

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<sup>322</sup> M. Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 82.

<sup>323</sup> Brudholm, "Revisiting Resentments," *Journal of Human Rights*, 9.

<sup>324</sup> Amery, "Resentments," *At the Mind's Limits*, 68.

condition corresponds completely to reality.”<sup>325</sup> Contra Nietzsche and contemporary psychologists, Amery rejects the equation of health with truth and morality. Indeed, given the coincidence of his psychic condition and reality, “Amery wants to address the Germans. Being labeled as ‘traumatized’ or ‘mentally deranged’ would of course all too easily exempt them from any responsibility to listen.”<sup>326</sup>

How does Amery see resentment in its moral dimension? The first feature that he points out is that resentment is a “logically inconsistent condition.” It is a kind of affect that “nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. Resentment blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future.”<sup>327</sup> In other words, resentment demands that time itself be reversed, reordered, and showed mercy. It demands, relentlessly, yet in vain, to challenge the very structure of irreversibility. As Rosen puts it, “resentment is a form of moral refusal that opposes both historical injustice and the processes that attempt to assimilate, obfuscate, or neutralize these injustices.”<sup>328</sup> This affect, while arising out of the human condition, rebels against it by fracturing it into necessarily singular, non-integrable experiences of suffering, the experiences that refuse to be equalized. Indeed, suffering assaults the seeming universality of the human condition affectively from within, the way auto-immune disorders turn the organism against itself by slowly destabilizing it.

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>326</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue: Jean Amery and the Refusal to Forgive* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 93.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Joseph Rosen, “Suffering and Responsibility: Between Amery and Levinas” in *On Jean Améry: Philosophy of Catastrophe*, ed. by Magdalena Żółkoś (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 283-4.

As a victim of persecution, Amery refuses to look peacefully to the future and to bear his suffering in stoic silence, in the facile parallelism to his torturers presumably bearing their guilt. His wish is not to become an accomplice of his persecutors by way of sharing the imaginary weight of guilt, which would indeed be unthinkable, but rather to have his persecutors negated *in a very particular way*. Amery is only too painfully aware that his resentment is likely to be mistaken for a “barbaric, primitive lust for revenge.” In his words, “it is not easy to reject the reproach that so simplifies the problem, and it is entirely impossible for me to refute the suspicion that I am drowning the ugly reality of a malicious instinct in the verbal torrent of an unverifiable thesis,”<sup>329</sup> i.e., revenge. It is not easy to demonstrate that the affect in question is in fact *moral*. Yet, this is the challenge that needs to be taken up in order to make visible what Amery calls “the moral truth of the conflict.”<sup>330</sup> Indeed,

Améry believes as little in the possibility of revenge as in the idea of atonement, which he describes as dubious from the outset: at the most, he considers it of theological significance and therefore irrelevant to him. The issue, then, is not to resolve but to reveal the conflict. The spur of resentment which Améry conveys to us in his polemic demands recognition of the right to resentment, entailing no less than a programmatic attempt to sensitize the consciousness of a people “already rehabilitated by time.”<sup>331</sup>

As Amery further points out, objectivity is out of place in the matters that concern political persecution, violence, and suffering. We could say that objectivity cannot reveal these phenomena as they really are, in the way they are given to human beings, just as it cannot make visible the subjective experience of the victim. As Amery explains, “the atrocity as atrocity has no objective character. Mass murder, torture, injury of every kind

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<sup>329</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *At the Mind's Limits*, 69.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>331</sup> Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 162.



are objectively nothing but chains of physical events.... they are facts within a physical system, not deeds within a moral system.”<sup>332</sup> The perpetrators see their actions only as expressions of their will, not as moral events. The function of Amery’s resentments is to establish a moral reality for the criminal and, I would argue, witnesses to suffering as well.

In other words, it is subjectivity or internality that is tasked with assigning moral values to objective events. It is subjectivity that is given the last word here, the subjectivity of the victim that can never experience its own suffering as comparable to the suffering of others. It is worth emphasizing here that it is not my intention to frame the different experiences of suffering as isolated, completely non-relational entities, akin to Leibniz’s windowless monads. Rather, I am proposing that it is the internal experience of the specific, singular circumstances *surrounding* this or that instance of suffering that refuses neutralization, comparability, and the drive to universalize it into an abstraction. We might say that painful stimuli do in fact affect humans and animals alike, equally and invariably. Yet, we rise in moral revolt precisely when the specificity *undergirding* one’s encounter with the unbearable nature of suffering falls into oblivion. For instance, someone who has been repeatedly traumatized in the past is likely to experience the *new* trauma very differently from someone who has been enjoying a fairly untroubled existence and good health up until this moment of personal wounding. The experience of someone whose suffering failed to gain proper recognition, whose suffering simply went unnoticed, is necessarily and qualitatively different from someone whose pain occasioned an increased level of support and subsequent mitigation.

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 70.

This is what might be called the interior truth of the matter, the truth that there is a decisive variation and difference in every instance of suffering. The exterior truth of it ('exterior' as 'worldly'), as I will attempt to show later, is that the world itself is ill-equipped to recognize someone's suffering on its own terms, without subsuming it under the rubric of universality and equivalence. The bigger claim here is that the suffering that *feels* singular subjectively reflects the fact that some people are more vulnerable than others, that some get relief much faster than others. This truth is expressed internally because it has no voice in the outside world, with its sovereignty of the biological time of healing. While the victim is chained to the past, "the natural time-sense is ultimately future oriented... it is oriented towards continued survival, self-betterment and self-empowerment,"<sup>333</sup> which is also to say, forgetting.

As Amery explains, what is at stake in holding on to one's suffering is neither the blind thirst for revenge nor atonement. Poignantly, "the experience of persecution was, at the very bottom, that of an extreme *loneliness*. At stake for me is the release from the abandonment that has persisted from that time until today."<sup>334</sup> When the repeated murderer and torturer Wajs faced execution as the final punishment for his crimes, he, Amery believes, experienced the moral truth of his crimes, if only for a second. Perhaps what he hoped sounds something like this,

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when denunciation, abandonment, and horror ravaged the world, and when the evil-doers did not tremble at their misdeeds, is it truly the moral law in oneself that elicits a feeling of shame, sometimes at least, and only for a moment? Or, as the terrible story of V. Grossman suggests, is it not the

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<sup>333</sup> Ben-Shai, "To Reverse the Irreversible: On Time Disorder in Jean Améry," accessed on 0/7/27/2027, [https://www.academia.edu/1820856/To\\_Reverse\\_the\\_Irreversible\\_On\\_Time\\_Disorder\\_in\\_Jean\\_Am%C3%A9ry](https://www.academia.edu/1820856/To_Reverse_the_Irreversible_On_Time_Disorder_in_Jean_Am%C3%A9ry)

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

experience of the infinite in the form of the innocent condemned man looking at him, that, momentarily, troubles the guilty man? Ivan Grigoryevich, in Leningrad after twenty years in the Gulag, meets his denouncer, who, during that time, has prospered. With alert and sad curiosity Ivan Grigoryevich looked unrepentantly into Penegin eyes. And Pinegin for one second only, just for one second or perhaps two, felt he would gladly sacrifice his country house, his government decorations and honors, his authority and his power, his strength, his beautiful wife, his successful sons engaged in studying the nucleus of the atom—that he would gladly give up every last bit of it, just so as not to feel those eyes resting upon him.<sup>335</sup>

This is about one's sincere, passionate willingness to sacrifice everything to not be plagued by the innocence of the man this person irreparably, terribly wronged. At this admittedly imagined moment of Wajs's desire to undo his own actions, Amery's loneliness was lifted and he was no longer alone in the sheer physical brutality of his torture. Therefore, Amery's desperate fantasy is that the executioner joins the victim in the overwhelming regret concerning what has happened. This, indeed, is the peculiar way in which the reality of the criminal is negated. Put otherwise, this negation is not the death penalty, but *remorse and a desire for a radically different agency*.

However, the imagined regret of one individual cannot drown out the din of those who talk excitedly about reconciliation and the break from the unfortunate past. What kind of person would want reconciliation? As Amery explains,

whoever submerges his individuality in society and is able to comprehend himself only as a function of the social, that is, the insensitive and indifferent person, really does forgive. He calmly allows what happened to remain what it was. As the popular saying goes, he lets time heal his wounds. His time-sense is not disordered, that is to say, it has not moved out of the biological and social sphere into the moral sphere.<sup>336</sup>

Here the full force and originality of his contribution to the question of resentment start

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<sup>335</sup> Catherine Chalié, *What Ought I To Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas* (Londres: Cornell University Press, 2002), 46.

<sup>336</sup> Amery, "Resentments," *At the Mind's Limits*, 71.

coming to the fore. The refusal to forgive is the refusal of the biological time, i.e., the time that is nothing more than a linear, indifferent succession of events. Within the logic of the biological or natural time, the punishment that is temporally distant from the crime loses any meaning. Indeed, “one cannot demand in relation to the past; the irreversible is what cannot be turned around; the events of the past are what cannot be undone.”<sup>337</sup> Yet, this logic is irrelevant for “the person who perceives himself to be morally unique.”<sup>338</sup> To become and remain moral is to inhabit a different, relentlessly isolating order of affective temporality and it is in this sense that resentment “arises to the status of ethical protest.”<sup>339</sup>

By contrast, “natural consciousness of time actually is rooted in the physiological process of wound-healing and became part of the social conception of reality. But precisely for this reason it is not only extramoral, but also *antimoral* in character.”<sup>340</sup> Thus, what Amery is claiming here is that following the natural course of natural time, idly and effortlessly, runs counter to morality itself. “Man has the right and the privilege,” he goes on to say, “to declare himself to be in disagreement with every natural occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about.”<sup>341</sup> Once again, what is at stake here is the refusal to become unchained from the past and to forget its horrendous injustices. It is the refusal to make past suffering meaningful so as to move forward, to turn it into a story, to integrate it into the continuity of one’s life narrative. As

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<sup>337</sup> Brudholm, “Revisiting Resentments,” *Journal of Human Rights*, 21.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>339</sup> Magdalena Żółkoś, *Reconciling Community and Subjective Life: Trauma Testimony as Political Theorizing in the Work of Jean Amery and Imre Kertész* (New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2010), 21.

<sup>340</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 72.

<sup>341</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *ibid.*

Amery submits, “the moral power to resist contains the protest, the revolt against reality, which is rational only as long as it is moral.”<sup>342</sup>

To return to Ophir for a moment, we could say that Amery is rebelling against the time that congeals all that happens into necessity, the time that is homogenous or non-porous, foreclosing the possibility of any intervention. This is not the affective temporality that can be made to last in order to prolong the person’s joy or fractured in order to introduce an element of difference in the person’s experience of suffering as homogenous duration, but the time that always marches onward. I thus submit that Amery is revolting against the idea that things could not have been otherwise, that there was a necessity to them, that the time of the world unfolds in a way that is inherently amoral, since it never tarries in the face of violence and injustice. The crime of biological time is that it threatens to sweep us away from what defined our inner reality. In other words, he protests against the naturalization of evils and their forgetting in the name of progress.

It is worth noting that those against whom Amery wields the force of his resentment are not the specific individuals who personally inflicted torture upon him.<sup>343</sup> Had this been the case, the weight of the past could have been lifted once the individuals directly responsible for his suffering received their due punishment. The true object of his resentment is the German nation itself, which brings us to the question of collective guilt. The notion of collective guilt is meaningless if it is grounded in the idea that the German people possessed a common consciousness and a common will, which moved them to

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> While he does imagine the final moments of his torturer, the worst Nazi criminals were apprehended fairly efficiently and, upon their trial and execution, they were forever gone from our planet. Amery, however, is addressing a far larger group of people.

commit their crimes. As Arendt succinctly puts it, “where all are guilty, nobody is.”<sup>344</sup> The total guilt of a people finds its origin in individual guilty conduct, when it is experienced summarily, such as “guilt of deed, guilt of omission, guilt of utterance, guilt of silence.”<sup>345</sup> More precisely, “knowing, without acting, grants acceptable to the action.”<sup>346</sup> Indeed, it remains puzzling how millions of people claimed to be blind to the events that surround them. Many German did, in fact, claimed with an utmost sincerity that they had no idea whatsoever of what was going on, but one is justifiably skeptical of such claims. In a word, collective guilt is *specific and statistical*, comprised of individual decisions and a million of individual acts.

However, statistical guilt can be only vague and uncertain, since “precise figures are lacking, and no one can determine how many Germans recognized, approved, or themselves committed the crimes of National Socialism, or in helpless revulsion allowed them to pass in their name.” The true number of the participants in the murderous political regime is bound to remain vague, but this is beside the point. As Amery claims, “every one of us victims had his own statistical experience, even if it was only approximate and cannot be expressed in numbers.”<sup>347</sup> In other words, every victim acutely felt the general number of those who attempted to come to their aid and those who tormented them. The people who revolted in the face of terror and violence were undeniably, tragically *fewer* than those who did not.

The individuals who did attempt to help were, however, nothing more than a

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<sup>344</sup> “Guilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal. It refers to an act, not to intentions or potentialities.” Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken, 2005), 147.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>346</sup> Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, 237.

<sup>347</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 75.

minority amidst the majority who actively participated or at least condoned the totalitarian regime with its rampant murders and atrocities. Crucially, *these benevolent, moral individuals did not tip the scale*. The decency displayed by a small group of people could not overshadow the vast majority who participated in torture and murder. What might, *prima facie*, seem like a facile, even anti-intellectual quantification on Amery's part is nothing, however, other than a mundane act of judgment. The democratic statesman has to deal with quantities just as much as the surgeon who must assess a malignant tumor.<sup>348</sup> "I, too," Amery writes, "had to determine the quantity of good comrades on the one hand and of the scoundrels and indifferent ones on the other when, in the midst of the German people, I had to reckon every moment with falling victim to ritual mass murder."<sup>349</sup>

What I want to suggest and even insist on is that Amery's suffering pointed beyond itself in that it referenced those who exercised their agency to help and those who did not.<sup>350</sup> This was not a neutral observation that happened to 'accompany' his experience of suffering, not by a long shot. Rather, it was woven into that very experience, becoming its very tissue and the passionate judgment concerning the other's agency that either failed or came to life. *If suffering is the duration of the encounter with the unbearable, each instance of it becomes synonymous with one's absence or failure to offer relief and to exercise judgment about the acceptability of this instance of*

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>350</sup> To be sure, here I am no longer speaking of Amery vis-à-vis his torturers, but of the witnesses or bystanders both to his torture and to his life after it

suffering.<sup>351</sup> Describing his experience of torture, Amery speaks of the trust in the world that had been irrevocably broken.<sup>352</sup> Indeed, “the expectation of help, the certainty of help, is indeed one of the fundamental experiences of human beings, and probably also of animals.... The expectation of help is as much a constitutional psychic element as is the struggle for existence.”<sup>353</sup> However, he goes on to say, “with the first blow from a policeman's fist, against which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived.”<sup>354</sup> Torture means the end of the belief in an other's benevolent agency, that someone will come to your rescue. It means that “with the experience of torture... trust is lost, never to be regained, even if the victim can regain some sense of his intrinsic self-worth, he will no longer have the confidence that it will matter to others....”<sup>355</sup> Instead, the act of physical violence shatters one's sense of agency, by pinning the individual against his or her physicality, or

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<sup>351</sup> “There exists in our society a widespread fear of judging that has nothing whatever to do with the biblical “Judge not, that ye be not judged,” and if this fear speaks in terms of “casting the first stone,” it takes this word in vain. For behind the unwillingness to judge lurks the suspicion that no one is a free agent, and hence the doubt that anyone is responsible or could be expected to answer for what he has done. The moment moral issues are raised, even in passing, he who raises them will be confronted with this frightful lack of self-confidence and hence of pride, and also with a kind of mock-modesty that in saying, Who am I to judge? actually means We're all alike, equally bad, and those who try, or pretend that they try, to remain halfway decent are either saints or hypocrites, and in either case should leave us alone.” Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 105.

<sup>352</sup> “It is difficult to account for this loss of trust except by appealing to the experience and testimonies of victims of this sort of violation, who tend to experience the world and social relations with a heightened sense of anxiety, disquietude and fear, often perturbing their capacity to establish normal relationships and comportments.” Ben-Shai, “To Reverse the Irreversible: On Time Disorder in Jean Améry,” 78.

<sup>353</sup> Amery, “Torture,” *At the Mind's Limits*, 28.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>355</sup> J. M. Bernstein, “My Calamity... My Physical and Metaphysical Dignity,” *Żółkoś, Magdalena. On Jean Améry: Philosophy of Catastrophe* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 39.



highlights the agency that remains passive in the face of suffering, forever dividing human beings into those who allow evil to happen and those who revolt against it, even if it means the smallest act of kindness. (Incidentally, in Hannah Arendt's words, "it is as though mankind had divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence.... and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience in their lives.")<sup>356</sup> There is no middle ground, not after the experience of tremendous evil inflicted on one human being by another. While there is a number of discussions surrounding Amery's notion of "losing trust in the world,"<sup>357</sup> I am concerned that the problematic is not formulated clearly and concretely enough. Instead, I interpret this notion as losing fundamental trust *in the moral agency and judgment of others*.

Thus, I argue that the subjective experience of the victim is also crucially characterized by the razor-sharp affect directed at those who could have helped but did not. The victim sees other human beings first and foremost as *agents*, as those who could have tipped the scale, who could have made the world livable for the victim in the wake of suffering, but failed to. Which is to say that the sufferer sees others primarily as radically free, since it is precisely the exercise of their freedom that condemns the victim to abandonment and extreme loneliness or offers them a glimpse of humanity and decency. The experience of the victim reveals to us the raw and lucid moment of freedom, the freedom of acting otherwise, the moment that social, political, and theoretical forces, conjoined with the existing power relations, want us to forget.

In other words,

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<sup>356</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 2004), xxv.

<sup>357</sup> See, for instance, Bernstein, *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 73-116.

of all the inmates who struggled with whether the Holocaust was evil, only Mr. Smith said, “Sure it was evil. Even if most Germans didn’t do anything bad. It’s evil if you just don’t care about others.” It was a simple statement, but few informants, inmate or free, uttered its like. The tone was new. He was not talking only about responsibility. He was talking about regret, about how sad and tough it is to live in a world where people just don’t care.<sup>358</sup>

Despite the strangeness of calling the evil nature of the Holocaust into question, or, more precisely, posing it *as a question*, the investigation into the recurring coupling of evil and indifference is, nevertheless, yet to be undertaken, together with a rigorous study of its effects on the victims of indifference in the face of evil or indifference *as evil*.

However, it is Amery himself who ends up being burdened with the weight of collective guilt, not those responsible for what was inflicted on him and millions of others and not those who failed to rise in protest against ritual mass murder. “The world,” he writes, “which forgives and forgets, has sentenced me, not those who murdered or allowed the murder to occur.”<sup>359</sup> More precisely, the world now takes the side of the young generation of Germans who, strictly speaking, have indeed very little to do with the crimes of their fathers. Unlike Amery, the world is not chained to the cross of its past crimes, no matter their monstrosity or magnitude. Put otherwise, the past is “not of our doing, not within our power to change or control (except by means of interpretation and appropriation), and does not directly touch on us. This attitude sanctions the growing indifference of younger generations to the past.”<sup>360</sup>

The inevitable succession of generations, not in the more abstract sense of the arrow of time flying forever forward, but in the specific sense of Germany’s young

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<sup>358</sup> Fred Alford, *What Evil Means to Us* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 166.

<sup>359</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 79.

<sup>360</sup> Ben-Shai, *Moral Psychology*, 94.

people wanting to live their lives, is perhaps the most difficult challenge Amery has to take up. His experience of torture is quickly disappearing into the impenetrable, blackest depth of the immovable past. How can Amery defend his stance in the face of those who, in the universally shared predicament of irreversibility and mortality, cannot possibly undo the deeds and sins of their fathers? How can he hold the younger generation accountable for the events that are receding into the temporal distance? Indeed, how can the past itself be put on trial? Amery's task is to defend his resentments in the face of the future that is incessantly and irrevocably neutralizing the events of the past.

It is at this point that the question Amery addresses becomes that of history itself. To his mind, the rejection of healing that the natural or biological time (the time, we recall, whose nature is *antimoral*) brings about has a particular historical function, the possibility of imagining history otherwise. More precisely, if the refusal to heal were to fulfill its task, "it could historically represent, as a stage of the world's moral dynamics of progress, the German revolution that did not take place."<sup>361</sup> The resistance to natural forgetting and the rebellion against biological time would allow for a re-imagining of history from a moral standpoint.<sup>362</sup> Amery's demand does indeed appear impossible, for his demand is to change the immutable past.

As he proceeds to state, the German people are to become "sensitive to the fact that they cannot allow a piece of their national history to be neutralized by time, but must

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<sup>361</sup> Amery, "Resentments," *At the Mind's Limits*, 77.

<sup>362</sup> Since the idea of history as a nation possessed by the common will and identity has no place in these considerations, I choose to interpret history as a kind of inversion of Amery's statistical experience. If the scale had been tipped and the majority of the German people protested against the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime, these acts of evil would not have taken place at all.

integrate it.”<sup>363</sup> What remains to be examined here is the nature of this integration, i.e., the becoming-moral of history, the way Amery sees it. What has to be altered, if the world is to acknowledge the predicament of the victims of political persecution and of other calamities, is the people’s *relation* to history. According to Amery, “on the field of history there would occur what I hypothetically described earlier for the limited, individual circle: two groups of people, the overpowered and those who overpowered them, would be joined in the desire that time be turned back and, with it, that history become moral.”<sup>364</sup> The relation to history he is articulating here is the desire to undo its catastrophes and to reverse its crimes. In other words, he’s calling for the vision of history as what *ought not to have happened, as a moral failure of innumerable individuals*. These individuals were not simply swept up by monstrous events. They made decisions and choices, the choices for which Amery is now holding them accountable. If history is to become moral, it is to resurrect the agency of each and every individual, to see every one of them as capable of judgment and action. Indeed, the way in which I am interpreting the notion of history here is the totality of human actors and their choices. To rewrite history is to envision human being assuming their radical freedom, not as a handful of ‘decent individuals,’ but as a majority and as a nation.

*What we thus put on trial is the sweeping failure of agency.*

In other words, what Amery is calling for is the *desire* for a different and impossible temporal order, the order where human beings would have acted under the sign of moral urgency. The duration of his torment could have been disrupted, fractured, alleviated, thus demonstrating the moral agency of others. As human beings, we cannot

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<sup>363</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 78.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*

transcend what is impossible, but we become human and, according to Amery, moral, in *desiring to*. As Zolkos puts it, Amery's "catastrophic testimony accentuates the asymmetrical and 'infinitely demanding' claims of wounded subjectivity, rather than the possibilities of ever achieving dyadic symmetry between self and Other."<sup>365</sup> The possibility of symmetry is forced into crisis because what Amery demands is the impossible reversal of time and radically different agency. However, it is worth noting that Amery's moral desires are exactly the opposite of being 'infinitely demanding.' His demand for radical agency is inseparable from the helping person's brutally honest assessment of his or her capacity to offer relief, so that Amery's vision of ethics is rooted in a viable notion of agency, in what *one specific person can do*. To put it bluntly, infinite demands call for an ethical subject that can never exist, for he or she is stripped of human limitations.<sup>366</sup>

However, let me say more about Amery's demand for the impossible, so as to give it more specificity and situate it in the world. The problem with the prevailing accounts, as I see it, is that the affective call for the impossible is evocative and yet ultimately empty. To speak fast and loose, this wishful thinking, this thinking oriented toward the impossible, however courageous and defiant it may be, tells us nothing about the ways to halt or prevent the production of suffering or about the moral agency of others in the position to offer relief. Furthermore, it is equally difficult to imagine a moral response to the one who remains chained to the cross of the past if 'all' they are asking is

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<sup>365</sup> Żółkoś, *Reconciling Community And Subjective Life*, 16.

<sup>366</sup> Cf. "ethics is the experience of an infinite demand at the heart of my subjectivity, a demand that undoes me and requires me to do more, not in the name of some sovereign authority, but in the namelessness of a powerless exposure, a vulnerability, a responsive responsibility...." Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 132.

the impossible reversal of time. After all, the past cannot be the source of change for the victim or anyone at all for that matter. What I want to do here is to shift our attention even further from the problem of history to that of agency.

In other words, I want to interpret the desire for the impossible, a reversal of time, as demanding the recognition of contingency (the idea that the past could have been otherwise) and agency. In short, it is about seeing others, first and foremost, as agents. If one's suffering is to be addressed adequately, if it is to recognize and brought back into the worldly community in a meaningful way, it is to reject any excuse *not* to be an agent. The affective reality of the victim is that *everyone is an agent*, to a greater or lesser degree, that they are not chained to the moment of agony or being reduced to their tortured body, that they are capable of acting *freely*. This affective reality draws a stark distinction between those who are crucified by their torment, reduced to their sheer physicality, deprived of any agency whatsoever, and those who have at least a minimal degree of freedom, including the freedom to recognize and hear a suffering other's cry for help.

To put it still otherwise, the sufferer's reality becomes the devastating dichotomy between their own cruel, meaningless powerlessness and the capacity to act on the part of others that is not crushed by senseless violence. We could say that the sufferer has the keenest, sharpest insight into the possibility *and* impossibility of action, the pure possibility or impossibility twisted free of social habits, one's disposition, and a veil of justifications. Thus, the victim sees others as having the basic choice, simply by virtue of not being incapacitated or annihilated by violence, of helping or not helping, of acting or failing to act. *The sufferer has the unique perspective on the agency of others precisely*

*because he or she viscerally knows what it means to not have any agency whatsoever.*

Indeed, addressing the question of violence and its destruction of subjectivity or inner life, Weil sublimely speaks of

the other force, the force that does not kill, i.e., that does not kill just yet. It will surely kill, it will possibly kill, or perhaps it merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it can kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment. In whatever aspect, its effect is the same: it turns a man into a stone. From its first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive.<sup>367</sup>

*This* is the true work of suffering and violence and *this* is what it means to have no agency of any kind. Its deadliest assault on human existence is to turn a living being into a stone, with no interiority.

I submit that the radical agency in question, the agency that may well have been born in the victim's imagination or perhaps even hallucination under the yoke of unbearable torment, must be taken up as a moral challenge, it must be learned, practiced, and internalized, since otherwise the sufferer is condemned to feeling forever distanced from the world, as long as human beings evade their agency, sometimes out of indifference, sometimes out of malice, sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes out of not knowing what it is like to be stripped of any agency at all.<sup>368</sup> In other words, our understanding of agency and responsibility must be cultivated on the basis of the victim's affective reality. The sufferer will remain forever lonely if individuals transfer their responsibility to 'the system' or ignorance. This agency is rooted not in some objective

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<sup>367</sup> Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," *Chicago Review*, 18:2 (1965), 7.

<sup>368</sup> In this sense, we reject the idea that we must alter the foundation of the late capitalist society before we can relate to others morally. Once again, as a disabled woman, I have seen enough moral variation in people's comportment toward someone in need to doubt the fact that it is almost always possible to act otherwise.

freedom, not in the illusion of a self-sufficient individual, but in the moral demand and the tormented reality of the sufferer. To do justice to it and to bring the victim back into the shared world is to respond to the victim's demand for radical agency and responsibility.

Crucially, “perhaps this is one of the most important experiences known to man and beast. The need to seek someone's help and receive it, out of sheer generosity and understanding. Perhaps it is worth being born in order to make a silent plea and be heard.”<sup>369</sup> We owe this fundamentally central experience of moral agency to multiple suffering others. To hear your call for relief find a compassionate, practically inflected answer is to have the kind of moral experience that greatly determines the affective ‘afterlife’ of an event of suffering.

Thus, Amery's desire for the impossible is the desire that the human beings had acted *otherwise*. It is the desire that others had attempted to alleviate his agony and that the scale had been tipped. What we learn from Amery's affective reality is that while we cannot change our past actions, we *can* inhabit the present in the way Amery would want us to, as those who are not mere bystanders to suffering, as agents. This assumption of radical agency (the agency that refuses any facile excuses and will not be duped into docility and compliance) is inherently *moral*, for we come into our freedom for the sake of the victims and for the sake of lifting their deep loneliness by recognizing their experience. Thus, I believe the question here is not one of lamenting one's past moral failures, not only wishing to have acted otherwise, but *relating to one's past failures morally by exercising one's agency in response to ongoing suffering, not later, not*

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<sup>369</sup> Lispector, “An Experience,” in *Selected Cronicas*, Kindle ed.



*tomorrow, but now.*

Finally, I would like to venture the idea, which I believe is the silent crux of Amery's resentments, that what truly hurts and what binds the victim to the past is not so much brute physical pain, i.e., the moment of torture itself. Rather, it is the pain that comes from knowing, knowing deeply, viscerally, and inescapably, deep in your bones, that others could have done something about your suffering, but did not. It is the victim's futile, desperate, tormenting question, "Why *didn't* you?" It is this realization that rips you to shreds, that causes the deepest resentments, that confines you to the greatest solitude. It is the gnawing suspicion that the others who were absent, *chose* to be absent, either out of cowardice, indifference, or fear. To return to Ophir for a moment, we can say that "someone who is blind to the presence of evils does not stop being involved in the production of injustice and wrong because of that."<sup>370</sup> In other words, the presence or absence of others during one's suffering has far-reaching consequences for how the sufferer will inhabit in the world after the initial time of agony.<sup>371</sup>

Thus, the least we can do in response to the victim's torment is to become the agents the victims want us to be, the agents who relate to their past failure not through the solemnity and passivity of mourning, but through exercising their ability to intervene in ongoing evils, i.e., recognizing the superfluity of evils and the contingency of time, such that it is not a mere succession of moments, unidirectional and identical in their form, but affectively plastic and open to human intervention. Insofar as human beings assume their

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<sup>370</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 374.

<sup>371</sup> Recall that Amery felt relatively at home in the post-war Germany precisely because the weight of responsibility for people's actions during the totalitarian regime has not yet been lifted and both the perpetrators and those complicit in the regime were still held account for not acting otherwise.

freedom to act otherwise in the face of suffering, it is possible that the victim's access to the future will be restored. In other words, if human beings begin to act in accordance with the victim's affective reality, the victim may begin to believe that others will act otherwise precisely as a response to their past sins of inaction and complicity, thus joining the victim in a moral protest against indifference and changing the moral fabric both of the present and the future. Similar to Ophir's demand, we learn to inhabit the present in such a way as to prevent or minimize ongoing evils, i.e., to see the evils transpiring in the present from the standpoint of superfluity and moral urgency.

Amery's powerful and deeply disconsoling essay concludes with the poignant admission that "all recognizable signs suggest that natural time will reject the moral demands of our resentment and finally extinguish them."<sup>372</sup> The atrocities committed in the Nazi Germany are bound to lose their singular character and to be forced under a general category of the "Century of Barbarism." The victims will dissolve "into homogenous neutrality of the universal survival and the ability of the social whole to critically hold the past to account."<sup>373</sup> Furthermore, the singular fate of a multitude of victims will be lost in the figure of the universal victim. Amery is prescient in his resignation that the people will not be truly shaken by their failure to halt ongoing evil before it was too late, before the plasticity of the present, i.e., its ability to go either way, either toward reducing ongoing evils or increasing them. In short, the world *will* forget and Amery has no illusions about that. The immensity and monstrosity of the biological

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<sup>372</sup> Amery, "Resentments," *At the Mind's Limits*, 79.

<sup>373</sup> Philipa Rothfield, "The Singular Case of Jean Amery," *On Amery*, 223.

time-sense is, Amery concludes, insurmountable and his voice will soon appear.<sup>374</sup>

Indeed, Amery “was not unsure about the moral legitimacy of his rebellion against appeals to forgive or forget, but he did become resigned with regard to the hope that his protest and call for accountability would be heard. In 1978, at age sixty-six, Amery took his own life in a hotel room in Salzburg.”<sup>375</sup> In his words, the resentments of the victims, which he powerfully and unflinchingly calls the “emotional source of every genuine morality,” a morality for the losers, have “little or no chance at all to make the evil work of the overwhelmers bitter for them.”<sup>376</sup> The efforts to make history and the countless individuals comprising it moral are bound to be futile, and yet, they are morally necessary.<sup>377</sup> It is undeniable that there is stark “evidence of grief in Amery’s essay,” the grief that is “surely visible and especially apparent his preoccupation with, indeed valorization of, the dark emotions of pain and resentment as well as in his sense of hopelessness reflected in what he believed was the collapse of the social contract and in his final resignation.”<sup>378</sup> In other words, Amery essentially abandons any hope that

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<sup>374</sup> While Minkkinen writes that “*ressentiment* is... an expression of the death instinct and, consequently, a symptom of the victim’s original trauma,” I disagree with this clearly Freudian reading. I believe that Amery refused to distance himself from his ‘unseemly’ resentments because he was attempting to communicate his predicament as lucidly as possible, in order to be heard. See Minkkinen, “*Ressentiment* as Suffering,” *Law & Literature*, 527.

<sup>375</sup> Brudholm, “Revisiting Resentments,” *Journal of Human Rights*, 8.

<sup>376</sup> Amery, “Resentments,” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 81.

<sup>377</sup> Perhaps we can restate this as follows, to pry into Amery’s affective logic a bit further: it is *the world* that sees healing as inevitable, not the victim him- or herself. For Amery, healing was nothing short of impossible. We could thus say that it is forcing the form of inevitability-as-healing on one’s suffering that Amery is rebelling against. After all, is this inevitability not illusory when it is a simple fact that some victims do not recover or heal at all?

<sup>378</sup> Dennis Klein, “Resentment and Recognition: Toward A New Conception of Amery *At the Mind Limits*,” *On Jean Amery*, 98.

human beings will never take up radical agency the way it is experienced by the sufferer, by recognizing the moral truth of the victim's predicament, just as he rejects the belief that the biological time can ever be destabilized by malleable, affective temporality. He gives up the hope that others will realize that simply extending a helping hand to a suffering other can give rise to an affectively different experience of time for the victim, i.e., the hope that we can become *participants* in the production of affective temporality, thus de-naturalizing and *politicizing* it.

While Amery locates the problem in the seemingly inevitable conflict between the moral time of the sufferer and the biological time that promises healing to all, I want to suggest that the affect of resentment signals not only a failure of agency on behalf of those who *could have helped the victim*, i.e., misrecognition of time as an inexorable, unalterable, non-human or inhuman force, forever resistant to any human intervention, but also, crucially, *a chasm between the experience of the victim and the socio-political forms of its recognition or lack thereof*. Put otherwise, the work of resentment is to make visible the insufficiency and the inadequacy of the existing forms of recognition when it comes to grasping and bearing witness to individual, singular suffering. The world ought to differentiate and respond differently to those sufferers who were fortunate enough to make their predicament visible, evoke offers of relief from their addresses, and those who continue suffering from neglect even after their initial event of torment, whatever form it may have taken. For instance, one person's event of suffering may be the onset of an incurable illness and there is, at least as far as we know at the present, nothing man-made about it. In this case, the time between the initial event and relief (e.g., medical attention, pain management, and social support) is fortunately short. However, imagine a situation

where an incurably ill person is denied both medical care and social support. The evil that accumulates in the gap between their first moment of suffering and the significantly deferred relief is entirely superfluous. I thus submit that Amery's demand for the impossible is an invitation to study the worldly expressions of suffering and its situatedness as specifically and concretely as we can.

What this means is that resentment, far from being an irrational, thoughtless affect, one in need of clinical intervention, draws our attention to the gap between a more or less physical, brute instance of suffering, the suffering whose possibility undergirds all human bodies, and the singular, specific resonances it causes in the world. We can further speculate if the very split into moral and biological time is not itself socially produced or, at the very least, exacerbated by the existing socio-political conditions. When a society, comprised of concrete human beings, subsumes its agency under the rubric of progress and healing, such that there is no *moral need* to act otherwise (after all, the victims will 'recover' on their own, thanks to the healing of natural time), the view of time as universal and a-political becomes entrenched even deeper into the social and experiential fabric, making affective time into something idiosyncratic and stripped of any moral significance. However, the society that recognizes time as the element where we have the chance to stop evils from happening, where we become moral participants in the weaving of affective time, holds the promise of approximating and alleviating the affective reality of the victims.

I also want to add that a chasm between the experience of the victim and the worldly forms of its recognition is due to our current inability and lack of an appropriate sensibility when it comes to responding to moral urgency and to differentiate between its

intensities. We will learn to recognize the specificity of every instance of suffering once we begin to evaluate it from the standpoint of urgency, acknowledging the fact that some people need relief *right now*, that telling them that their suffering is no more special or urgent than that of others is essentially letting them die. Thus, Amery's steadfast refusal to let go of his resentments also calls forth for a different vision of the suffering one. According to this vision, victims are not equalized in their suffering and the harsh truth of resentment is that some victims are in a far more urgent situation than others. Treating the victims as if there were a universal imprint of violence on their minds and bodies means the estrangement of victims both from the world and from each other.

To say more about the alleged equivalence of victims, I submit that suffering is never 'only' suffering, like some kind of experiential island, forever suspended in a socio-political vacuum, divorced from the specificity of its occurrence and context. The 'dumb' pain that comes from a treacherous knife wound does not allow any differentiation between sufferers nor does it draw the socio-political dimension into its orbit. Thus, we move away the language of universal vulnerability, construed as follows,

what is it in the experience of vulnerability that might lead us to treat the other, indeed any Other wherever and whoever they are, as deserving an ethical response from us, moreover, a response that reveals our own potential vulnerability at their hands?" As experience of injury can be an opportunity for self-reflection about our fundamental dependency on and primary vulnerability to others, so can it generate "an apprehension of common human vulnerability...."<sup>379</sup>

What this is saying is that an experience of suffering initiates us into the universal vulnerability that we all share, i.e., an event of injury intrudes into our illusion of relative safety. In other words, Butler's thesis is that "vulnerability, understood in physical and

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<sup>379</sup> George Shulman, "On Vulnerability as Judith Butler's Language of Politics: From *Excitable Speech* to *Precarious Life*," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 39 (1–2): pp. 227- 235.

corporeal terms, configures a human condition in which it is the relation to the other that counts, that allows an ontology of linkage and dependence to come to the fore.”<sup>380</sup> According to this logic, recognizing our own vulnerability creates an important ethical bond between ourselves and others, as if the immediacy of the experience of our well-being were not much more powerful than the prospect of the loss of health. However, instead of mobilizing our cognitive and affective forces to make visible the precariousness that presumably erases the difference between a neighbor and a stranger, a friend and an enemy, a lawful citizen and a pariah, to humanize those who are otherwise seen as subhuman or inferior, I suggest a transition to *responses* to and contextualizations of that vulnerability and its worldly differentiation. It is to transition from a trace of violence or even the universal predicament of our bodily fragility to the circumstances surrounding it. Some circumstances demand moral urgency and an affective reorganization of time, while others allow for a degree of deferral. This is something we cannot know in advance, but only after a careful assessment and our best judgment concerning every situation.

Let me briefly discuss how the notion of vulnerability applies to the disabled. The argument goes that the disabled remind us of the transience of our health, of the universal horizon of decline and death that we, healthy or not so much, are all facing. After all, “death is the law-the ordinance of our existence.”<sup>381</sup> The work of this reminder is to minimize the social and interpersonal gap between the able-bodied and the disabled, such that the latter become welcomed in the human community. However, according to the disability scholar Sue Halpern,

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<sup>380</sup> Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 21.

<sup>381</sup> Lingis, *Deathbound Subjectivity* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1989), 109.

physical health is contingent and often short-lived. But this truth eludes us as long as we are able to walk by simply putting one foot in front of the other. As a consequence, empathy for the disabled is unavailable to most able-bodied persons. Sympathy, yes, empathy, no, for every attempt to project oneself into that condition, to feel what it is like not to be ambulatory, for instance, is mediated by an ability to walk.<sup>382</sup>

The very possibility of losing one's health is erased by the lived, immediate experience of one's current bodily integrity. Similarly, recognizing that one will at some point face decline and poor health will always be negated by the immediacy of one's current well-being. As such, this recognition remains formal and fails to incite moral conduct. Put otherwise, our knowledge that we are all subject to eventual decline is empty, without an experiential confirmation.

Returning to the social and interpersonal reception of suffering (indeed, we may say that society, and not only a clinical setting, is the only true receptacle of suffering and the awakening of agency is the only true response to it) we can say that while suffering is a physical, even neutral, impersonal occurrence, its ripples are inherently social, fortuitous, and singular. The very experience of suffering, the psychic wound, is thus inseparable from the efforts to prevent it and the actions taken in its aftermath. An event of suffering can become an occasion for a lot of different things, e.g., heightened support, compensation, visibility, attention, abandonment, even social or actual death, all of which are related to the distribution of privileges and modes of recognition, to the way society recognizes some victims but not others. Indeed, some victims become visible in their suffering and some slip into deadly obscurity. As long as we focus on the moment of agony or trauma alone, we allow for the inequality of recognition and remediation vis-à-

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<sup>382</sup> Susan Wendell, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability," ed. Lennard Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 247.



vis the victims.

Stated more provocatively, suffering, taken in isolation, does not make you a victim and it does not always warrant acting under the sign of urgency. The bearers of moral resentment rise in protest against the assertion that suffering automatically equals victimhood. The jolt of suffering is fundamentally equalizing, for joy and pain have been part and parcel of human existence since time immemorial. Indeed, “feelings of pain or pleasure or some quality in between are the bedrock of our minds.”<sup>383</sup> If being human means embracing the universality of suffering and the predicament of any human being out of our initiation into our finitude, if being human means placing hope for morality in our vulnerability, being *more than human* means de-naturalizing both ourselves and temporality, *it means seeing beyond what is universal to all of us in order to recognize the superfluous, unnecessary, human-made suffering*. Thus, it is also embracing radically different responses to this suffering. Which is to say that we must examine what comes before and after an event of injury, since it does not become equally visible or recognizable for everyone and it is only *some* people who have access to support channels and mechanisms of alleviation. We must see through the overwhelming chaos of suffering others, indistinguishable in the din of their pleas for help, in order to discern and judge (as Ophir puts it, “the suspension of judgment is a form of torture”<sup>384</sup>) those singular others who cannot wait and whose incite of moral urgency in their addresses.<sup>385</sup> We must examine one’s life *before* and one’s life *after*, in its constitutive embeddedness in

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<sup>383</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 3.

<sup>384</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 393.

<sup>385</sup> Note that while Amery’s agony originates in his torture, it ultimately becomes the experience of profound loneliness, a kind of forced detachment from the world that lacks the vocabulary and the means to recognize and mitigate his suffering.

the social fabric and the coexistence of multiple others.<sup>386</sup> Furthermore, we must judge where deferral is merited, to a degree, and where it is morally unacceptable.

We can draw several key lessons from this examination of the affect of resentment. First, I am interpreting Amery's moral revolt against the natural course of time as the revolt against the idea that human beings are not free to act otherwise, that failing to exercise one's agency in the face of evil is a matter of the immutable past and is thus best forgotten. In short, it is the revolt against the weak agency that simply goes along with the flow of biological time, oblivious to the idea that the desire to undo the past means inhabiting the present in such a way that one both experiences and discerns moral urgency and responds to it accordingly. In inhabiting the world morally, one relates to their tragic failings of the past by de-naturalizing the evils of the present and attempting to halt them, keenly aware of their failures and determined not to repeat them if at all possible. It is to take up the agency that the victim would have wanted, for failing to do so condemns the sufferer and future sufferers you will have a chance to offer relief to continued suffering and isolation from their fellow human beings. To expel the victim from the community of their fellow human beings is to hide behind the justifications, excuses, and reasons *not* to respond to ongoing evil. It is to de-prioritize the present where evils are still unfolding in favor of the fundamentally unchangeable past or abstract future others. Here I am amplifying the idea of fracturing one's duration of suffering by arguing that it must be followed by the recognition on the part of others that they *can* act otherwise, i.e., a taking up of their agency.

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<sup>386</sup> I also would like to suggest that framing events of suffering as an initiation into the equally shared human condition contributes to the indifference to someone's pain. After all, it is easier to dismiss something overwhelmingly undifferentiated and faceless as opposed to shivering limbs, starving bodies, and desperate eyes.

I thus submit that only *a concrete, embodied suffering other in the present has the crucial potential for activating our sense of agency*, such that we are forced to evaluate what we *can* and cannot *do* in order to halt this particular event of evil. In other words, only a specific other, not a multitude of others so often seen as the true worthy object of heroic actions, becomes paramount to forging the subjectivity that experiences moral urgency and that chooses to act so as to not abandon the victims facing what's further than death. (Parenthetically, I would argue that the sense of radical loneliness and abandonment continue to grow when you experience your fellow beings hiding under the guises of justifications, indifference, their perceived powerlessness vis-à-vis 'the system,' who remain oblivious to the idea that you are *truly* deprived of any moral considerations and agency,<sup>387</sup> if only while the torture lasts.) Furthermore, instead of treating the experience of the victims as pathological and irrational, we are to recognize that it is the victim him- or herself who has the keenest grasp of the conditions of our agency and we are to acknowledge that to not try to live up the victim's experience (again, in the time of suffering, the victim viscerally and irrevocably experiences others as present or absent, as moral or anti-moral) of our agency is to propagate further evils. Put otherwise, only a concrete suffering other allows us to tap into our agency and to become acting subjects.

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<sup>387</sup> It is worth noting that Rorty defines human being as having a breaking point. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty expounds George Orwell's view of what it means to be human. As he puts it, "there is nothing deep inside each of us, no common human nature, no built-in human solidarity, to use as a moral reference point."<sup>387</sup> In fact, "there is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them...." The only thing that we do share with other people as well as with animals is the ability to feel pain. Rorty goes on to say, "the worst thing you can do to somebody is not to make her scream in agony but to use that agony in such away that even when the agony is over, she cannot reconstitute herself." This is the meaning of humiliation: one is forced to denounce oneself, i.e., to denounce one's fundamental beliefs and uses of language, after which there is no return. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 177.

To bypass and ignore a singular suffering, i.e., your friend, your neighbor, a stranger the street, is to forego a keen glimpse into our agency and our particular capacities that the response to this singular other affords.<sup>388</sup> Responding to a concrete other coincides with the awakening of moral agency.<sup>389</sup>

Thus, Amery's resentment undermines the equivalence of the victims when we continuously fail to take into account the fact that the world can either amplify one's suffering or redress it. The moral truth of resentment is the blindness that prevents us from recognizing that the predicament of some victims is far more urgent than that of others. It is calling for a more nuanced optics of suffering. Amery's resentment thus signals our stubborn blindness and unwillingness to differentiate between victims, to strip them of the illusion of universality, and to *address each victim's predicament on its own terms, in accordance with the degree of its urgency.*

The moral time that Amery feels condemned to, in his solitude, is the time we can all share as long as we embrace the Ophirian idea that the time of the present can be

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<sup>388</sup> I would also argue that the thinking that embraces the practice on moral urgency and stands on the side of a singular suffering other goes hand in hand with the feeling of an almost unbearable weight, for committing to one single person, however great their need is, is to knowingly abandon other victims, whose suffering may indeed be more efficiently alleviated, but remains suffering nevertheless. However, it is my hope that the more we practice moral urgency, the more the importance of saving even one person will mitigate the feeling of 'not doing enough.'

<sup>389</sup> An unlikely voice echoes a similar idea, presented in religious terms: "it is characteristic that Christian terminology knows no "love of mankind." Its prime concept is 'love of one's neighbor.' It is primarily directed at the person and at certain spiritually valuable acts... and at 'man' only to the degree that he is a person and accomplishes these acts, i.e., to the degree to which he realizes the order of the 'kingdom of God.' It is directed at the 'neighbors," the "nearest' visible beings who are alone capable of. that deeper penetration into the layer of spiritual personality which is the highest form of love. Modern humanitarian love, on the other hand, is only interested in the' sum total of human individuals." Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press), 92.

affected, altered, and fractured through the exercise of moral sensibility and the revolt against the intolerable. While Amery remains harrowingly lonely in his conviction that time ought to be otherwise, Ophir gives us the tools for relating to time morally and *making* it otherwise. Recall that he evaluates catastrophes from the standpoint of moral time when he asserts that while the disasters of the past may be more serious, the ongoing catastrophes are *more important* because they can still be halted or reduced. Thus, I submit that what Ophir invites us to do is to turn Amery's time into a sensibility and morality.

In short, the heart of Amery's resentment (a) calls for differentiating victims according to their specific, worldly circumstances, (b) it alerts us to the devastating discrepancy between the victim's poignant, sharp vision of our agency and our habitual flight from our capacity to respond to ongoing evil, and (c) it suggests that the truth shrouded in affectivity is the truth that has not welcomed in the common thinking of the world, the truth that has been exiled because we believe that we are not equipped to respond to the victims morally and to evaluate their circumstances. While the victim's experience of our agency may indeed be feverish and hallucinated in their agony, refusing to take it up amounts to leaving this victim locked in the futility of their revolt against the indifference of others.<sup>390</sup> After all, delirium and hallucinations are another domain where uncomfortable truths can be exiled to.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> This is another way of saying that we owe the exercise of our agency to the victims, that agency is our moral responsibility. Furthermore, positing its source in the sufferer's delirium or hallucination unmoors this agency what the constraints of what is acceptable, reasonable, feasible.

<sup>391</sup> See an excellent discussion in *History Beyond Trauma* of the ways in which real-life tragedies find their expression in the seemingly senseless, delirious words of psychiatric

*All men must die... but we are not men.* If we want to respond to victims justly, we must become more than finite beings subject to the same physical predicament such as the sensation of pain, aging, and decay, precisely because we have the possibility to be *moral* and therefore to refuse to convert suffering into something abstract and neutralized, i.e., into an essentially equalizing occurrence, into the universal bodily condition. We have the power and the right to refuse to dissolve suffering without a trace into the physical wound or the psychic injury in order to hold on to the surplus of suffering stemming from the social inequality of the victims. We have the possibility of rejecting the idea of time as universal and inhuman, recognizing that the experience of time, i.e., whether it is joyful, unbearable, or imperceptible, is shaped by multiple man-made factors and is thus open to intervention.

If we are to take up Amery's challenge, we need to learn to see ourselves as agents, capable of judgment and intervention into the uneven distribution of privileges, support mechanisms, and injustices, capable of questioning and redressing the ways in which suffering is recognized and alleviated unequally. Our attention is no longer centered solely on the initial time of suffering, but on also its subsequent 'fate.' This task remains impossible as long as we fail to properly situate concrete others in their suffering and in their differing worldly circumstances. It remains impossible as long as our attention is diverted from a singular suffering other, either toward the opacity of the future or society at large. To become more than human is to go beyond the universal human vulnerability and our shared horizon of death, so as to study the social dimension of each instance of suffering and, furthermore, to stop upholding the view that we all partake in

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patients. Françoise Davoine, and Jean-Max Gaudillière. *History Beyond Trauma* (Albany: Other Press, 2004), Parts I-II.

the universal suffering by virtue of being human, at the expense of overlooking socially produced suffering, and to put different moral valences on the universally vulnerable flesh and the specific circumstances that are causing unnecessary harm.

To become more than human is to not tap into our universal condition of precariousness, in the hope of immediacy of sharing it with all other human beings, but to *politicize* different types of suffering that befall concrete others. Finally, to become more than human is resist the temptation to turn finitude into an ethics, just like it is to drive a moral wedge between our freedom and our finitude, so that the latter is no longer an excuse of doing ‘too little,’ exactly as our finite capacities allow, as if any kind of comparison between the mortal and immortal moral subjects were in fact possible or even desirable. We are more than human because we refuse to use our finitude either as an illusory bond that we all share or as an excuse to do nothing.

In other words, we cannot become moral agents without positioning a concrete suffering other, the person next to us who needs our help, the one before us in pain<sup>392</sup> is the center of our moral endeavors.<sup>393</sup> As Derrida starkly put it, “there is no common measure able to persuade me that a personal mourning is less grave than a nuclear

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<sup>392</sup> Cf. Derrida’s provocatively haunting statement, the world ends with each singular death. Indeed, “each time, and each time singularly, each time irreplaceably, each time infinitely, death is nothing less than the end of the world.” See Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 140.

<sup>393</sup> Recalling Ophir’s words that his theory is a kind of “negative utilitarianism,” I want to suggest that while utilitarianism correctly focuses on the concrete results and the reduction of harms, its aim is to cast its saving net over as many people as possible. This makes utilitarianism incompatible with an emphasis on one particular person. As Singer argues, we ought to satisfy the greatest number of interests of conscious beings, emphasizing the idea that sacrificing our self-interests even minimally can indeed significantly maximize the interests of many people. See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

war.”<sup>394</sup> Failing to do so means reaffirming the status quo where some victims become more visible and others sink into oblivion, rising in a futile revolt against the world that failed to recognize the specificity of their suffering, subsuming it under the universally shareable wound, i.e., the univocity of the actual or possible injury. Which is to say, seeing ourselves simply as fundamentally equal in the face of death or in the throes of physical, value-free suffering, such that the singular, worldly circumstances no longer truly matter, such that the question of subsequent forgetting or remembering seems irrelevant, such that all specificity disintegrates into the ever-receding, universal horizon of finitude, is not enough.

Jean Amery expects more from us.

*Victims* expect more from us.

To take a step back, let us recall that, according to both Spinoza and Ophir, there are different types of temporality and that they go hand in hand with particular affects, i.e., joy, sorrow, grief, and so on. Amery linked his overwhelming feeling of resentment to his peculiar sense of moral time, which set him forever apart from the biological time of the world, yet, as we saw, he abandoned the hope that the world would ever recognize the existence of multiple temporalities, the moral and the *antimoral* one. Ophir went much further in asserting that it is our moral duty to make space in our thinking and practice for understanding possibly lesser evils *insofar as they are happening in the present*. If the superfluity of evils is expressed most sharply and poignantly in the

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<sup>394</sup> Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now: Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives,” tr. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Psyche I: Inventions of the Other*, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 387-409.



sufferer's experience, structurally (the duration of an unbearable excitation) and experientially ('Why won't you stop this?'), this superfluity speaks in the language of intolerable, wounding affects. If the production of damaging superfluity can be stopped or altered, we can transform the injurious affects either by changing the circumstances of the sufferer or at least by introducing difference into the relentless flow of equally tormenting moments. Furthermore, if we reject the idea of suffering as a pure scorching intensity, and begin to see it also as a visceral, truly life-changing experience of others *as either morally absent or present*. Taking seriously what might be the fundamental feature of the victim's experience, we are invited to take up the moral challenge of becoming the agents the victims hoped us to be. We could say that Amery's affective truths became moral practices in Ophir.

Finally, affects have as a twofold role to play in the idea of evil as production and the role of temporality in it. What I mean here is that most of us who have experienced any kind of pain knows that it undoes our mastery and we are overcome with the unbearable feeling of "No more!" That gives us the ability to recognize the tormenting, saturated temporality of grief, for example, and to make this situation the center of intervention or disruption for the sake of the sufferer caught in the seemingly endless 'now,' the incessant return of the same thoughts, feelings, and stabs of pain. Similarly, when we manage to alter the feeling of grief even temporally, briefly, fleetingly, we reassert the efficacy of our actions vis-à-vis ongoing produced evils, making the equation of evil and production into a viable moral model.

Ophir disintegrates a scene of evil by urging us to study its structure, how it is made and produced, so that we know how to abolish it. In other words, he disintegrates it

both practically and theoretically. Furthermore, he introduces the idea of moral urgency to draw our attention to ongoing evils and this idea becomes the means of articulating the irredeemable specificity of others and the circumstances indispensable for understanding their singular suffering. Without caring for the suffering other next to you, the concern for multiple distant others is hardly capable of offering a viable ethical theory. Only a singular suffering other can give you a glimpse into your own agency, stripping your interiority of any excuses, since acting without a stark sense of one's agency, even with the best of intentions, is either hypocritical or futile.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Levinas After Ophir: Alterity Reconsidered**

I contemplate the moment in the garden. The idea of allowing your own  
crucifixion.

—Unknown

Thus far, the work in question has been focused on aligning the understanding of evil as social production, affective temporality, markedly different from the biological clock-time, and the problem of suffering. In so doing, I have capitalized on the potential this specific view on evil has for halting ongoing suffering understood as a type of superfluous evil and for activating our sense of moral urgency. In other words, I have been examining various problems (such as the victim's subjective experience, the vision of urgency as a thoughtless, knee-jerk reaction, the non-equivalence of victims, and the question of freedom or agency) from the standpoint of the present that is still open to alteration because it has not yet congealed into the cruelly unchangeable past, thus articulating the theoretical and practical consequences of Ophir's central insights.

The last chapter of this work will focus on the selected strands of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who is rightly considered the central ethical thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Continental philosophy. My engagement with Levinas, who is known for, among other things, for his insistence on the ethical value of absolute otherness and transcendence, will be twofold. First, I want to hold on to some of his key concepts, employing them in the tentative ethical theory I have been outlining. Second, I will discuss and rearticulate some Levinasian notions from the perspective of evil as production, thus reshaping and casting a new light on them. I will thus situate his central ideas in the world as we know it, as concretely as possible, moving away from the realm of transcendence, roughly understood as a kind of experience that cannot take place in our world or a rupture of the familiar. Overall, my general approach to Levinas's thought here will be probing, risky, at times musically repetitive, at times serpentine, always fully aware of the complexity of its task.

Why Levinas and his pathos of transcendence though? Have we not affirmed our commitment to our world in all of its specificity? In Ophir's theoretical space, we are speaking of studying the patterns of production and distribution of evils like we study physics, of concrete multiple others, and of affective temporality, which signals the presence of superfluous evil as suffering and the potential for de-structuring this sense of time, transitioning from one affect to another. We are rooted firmly in the world, oriented toward the abolition or reduction of socially, humanly created evils. However, Levinas speaks of a decisive break from immanence or the world construed as the totality of relations and equivalences when I encounter the absolute other, who is 'otherwise than being' [*autrement qu'être*]. For Levinas, "the primal scene of morality is the realm of the

face-to-face [*le face à face*], of the tremendous encounter with the Other as a *Face*.”<sup>395</sup>

While Ophir speaks of concrete, finite, embodied others and moral sensibility characterized by its fluctuations,<sup>396</sup> Levinas uses the terms such as infinity, surrendering to the other *qua* ‘substitution,’ overcoming ontology or twisting free of being itself, and my inescapable, infinite<sup>397</sup> responsibility for the destitute absolute other<sup>398</sup> [*Autrui*] in need.<sup>399</sup> Furthermore, if Ophir begins with a recoil from the evils in the world, Levinas begins with the primacy of the face-to-face relation that takes place in the extra-worldly register, turning the initial ethical encounter into that which antecedes knowledge, the grasp of the world, and even subjectivity itself. Thus, it would seem that while Ophir is the thinker of concrete others and the evils that befall them, i.e., the thinker of immanence and the superfluous being of evils, Levinas promises to take us to a place outside the world where an encounter with absolute otherness or singularity is possible, to instigate our ethical comportment.

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<sup>395</sup> Bauman, “The World Inhospitable To Levinas,” *Philosophy Today* 4(2): pp. 151–67.

<sup>396</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 16.

<sup>397</sup> Even though I cannot go into this discussion in the present work, the idea of infinity plays an important role in Levinas’s thinking. Suffice to say that the gist of it aligns easily with the Cartesian model. That is, “the reflective I discovers itself to have understood after the fact, to the way in which the infinite is contained in the finite, or the idea of God’s existence as somehow exceeding the I who has the idea. One can see that the infinite is there before the path of contemplation or meditation is undertaken by the I who already has access to the idea of the infinite, even if it has not fully comprehended what this means. In this sense, the idea of God precedes the I that thinks it, and overflows the very thought that tries to contain it.” See Tina Chanter, “Ontological difference, sexual difference, and time,” eds. Claire Katz, and Lara Trout, *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2005), 127.

<sup>398</sup> While ‘Other’ is usually written with the capital O, as is “Autrui” in the original, I chose to use a lower-case variation.

<sup>399</sup> See Derrida’s influential essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” where he problematizes the Levinasian radical alterity. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Thus, to repeat the question, “Why juxtapose the suffering of multiple singular others with the height of absolute otherness and why infect immanence and worldliness with the specter of transcendence?” I am bringing these two figures together because, while I believe that Levinas’s radical alterity, his notion of the world, and transcendence need to be substantially re-articulated, often contra Levinas himself, I think that these two ways of thinking about morality can enter in a creative synthesis. More specifically, it is certainly true that Levinas sees absolute human alterity as necessarily morally relevant, i.e., he imbues it with the highest moral value, but, beyond the argument that we *first* must recognize another human being *as* singular, that we must twist free of egoist sameness *before* we can even open up the possibility of an ethical relation, it is unclear how radical alterity is morally relevant for multiple suffering others in the world. Indeed, to be blunt about it, it is relevant only insofar as Levinas posits egotism (the primacy of the self) as his starting point.

What I would like to do then is to re-describe otherness as an event of human suffering whose shards are visible in and inseparable from concrete others, i.e., arguing that to present suffering in its alterity and to articulate its relation with subjectivity will put Ophir’s point about the scandal of superfluity of man-made evil into sharper relief.<sup>400</sup> That is, I hope to intensify the moral significance of alterity understood as human suffering by articulating its catastrophic work of senselessness and the cruel overwhelming of what is human. To be more precise, alterity is morally relevant for

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<sup>400</sup> “Imagine morality as a domain or a social sphere with stakes, concerns, and interests of its own. The stakes would be the distress, humiliation, suffering, and, more generally, the mal-being of others, the concern would be how to reduce them, and the interest in the wellbeing of others.” Ophir, “Disaster As A Place Of Morality: The Sovereign, The Humanitarian, And The Terrorist,” *Qui Parle*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 2006), pp. 95-116.

Levinas because it coincides both with the singularity of another human being *and* suffering.<sup>401</sup> An encounter with the absolute other is, at the same time, an encounter with suffering, since Levinas is always insistent that the other is in distress, hungry, destitute. This encounter is yoked to transcendence, which I take to mean that it signals the primacy of the other over me, insofar as the other precedes all worldly relations and our cognitive mastery of the things around. I submit that alterity is to be rearticulated as an event of suffering, meaning that we need a key shift of emphasis from understanding it as a kind of oversaturated human singularity to the predicament that befalls *some others*. It is no longer the absolute other, implicative of all worldly others, takes the center stage here, but the radical alterity of suffering itself. It is morally relevant because it is the distress of others that forms the core of any moral inquiry and because it is our task to present suffering in its superfluity in order to de-naturalize it. If suffering is not simply *one* type of evil, but emblematic of its key structural elements, then situating it within human existence in its radical alterity will only further our understanding of the problem and deepen our sense of revolt against the slowly unfurling, almost death-like foreignness of suffering. To suffer is to stand in perpetuity, in one's radical passivity, on the threshold of death, before its heavy, ruby-studded door into the ultimate cessation. *In short, I will go on to argue that alterity is a central characteristic of suffering and not of pure human singularity.*

Let us now turn to Levinas proper, to examine why he is led to posit the absolute other as the center of his ethical vision. While his work encompasses a wide range of

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<sup>401</sup> While I posit the existence of moral desire as one of my starting points and Ophir suggests that there is nothing terribly extraordinary about a sense of revolt vis-à-vis an evil, Levinas seems to think that only the jolt of naked humanity can transform us into moral subjects.

worldly phenomena, such as enjoyment, fatigue, insomnia, caress, hunger, femininity, effort, mortality,<sup>402</sup> all of his depictions can be subsumed under one overarching claim, which is to say, that ethics is first philosophy, with the absolute other at its heart. I will begin by briefly discussing the intellectual tradition he is steeped in and his particular method, before attempting to elucidate this idea of the primacy of ethics. Levinas was a rigorous reader of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl who is traditionally seen as the founder of phenomenology. The question is then, What is phenomenology or intentional analysis, as Levinas understands and employs it? As we read in the preface to his work *Totality and Infinity*, “intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought.... these horizons endow them with a meaning.”<sup>403</sup> In short, we could say that intentional analysis is the search for the *structures* of things, the structures that remain hidden in our everyday commerce in the world.

The naiveté Levinas speaks about is the natural attitude, the way we go through our daily life. In our everyday life, we engage with various things in the world, habitually and without much reflection, considering them a matter of course. We have emotional responses in particular, predictable situations, we encounter and correctly identify material things, we talk to each other, go to work, eat our lunch. However, our world also goes beyond what immediately presents itself to us insofar as we have dreams, we imagine, we remember our past experiences, and anticipate future ones. In this model, the

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<sup>402</sup> See Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2001) and *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013).

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 28.

world is to be understood as the ultimate background, context, or setting for ourselves and everything we ever experience. As such, it forecloses the thought of infinity, i.e., the thought that radically exceeds our mind. The self or the I, in its turn, is a kind of center around which everything experiential revolves. The self is the dative or the *to whom* all worldly things manifest themselves.

The natural attitude is one of different, non-philosophical beliefs, where we essentially take things at their face-value, without pausing to reflect upon them. More precisely, “the natural attitude is properly the home of all of our activities with the sole exception of philosophy, which can understand the natural attitude only by leaving it.”<sup>404</sup> This naïve attitude is contrasted with the phenomenological one, which is known as *reduction*. What do we then mean by reduction? In undertaking it, “the phenomenologist detaches himself from the plane of ordinary life in the world, and, so to speak, rises with his reflective eye to a transcendental perch.”<sup>405</sup> The phenomenologist does not negate the existence of worldly things, but rather suspends any assumptions about them.<sup>406</sup> For instance, “the phenomenologist is no longer focused on the work of art as an object ‘in itself,’ but on how the work of art presents itself as a work of art in experience (as opposed, say, to something that presents itself as a perceptual object only, or as an object

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<sup>404</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *Edmund Husserl and the Phenomenological Tradition: Essays In Phenomenology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 31.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>406</sup> According to Edmund Husserl, “we direct our seizing and theoretically inquiring regard to pure consciousness in its own absolute being. That, then, is what is left as the sought-for “phenomenological residuum” though we have “excluded” the whole world with all physical things, living beings, and humans, ourselves included.” Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2014), 113.



within the realm of physical science).”<sup>407</sup> In other words, we step back or withdraw from the world in order to suspend our beliefs about it and the things in it, so as to come to a deeper understanding of them. What Levinas wants to do via the phenomenological reduction, broadly speaking, is to define the hidden structures of our life that give meaning to it. These important structures of the phenomena we encounter in the world and in our inner life are invisible in the naiveté or the natural attitude of our lives. Indeed, “it was only by removing all traces of the natural attitude in regard to our cognitive achievements that their true essences can come into view in an undistorted manner.”<sup>408</sup> “The search for the concrete” is then the search precisely for these fundamental structures of meaning. In a sense, phenomenology is a philosophy of reminders, i.e., of what is otherwise forgotten or overlooked.

Now, the fundamental principle of phenomenology is that all thinking is *of* or *about* something, which is where Levinas becomes to problematize this line of thinking.<sup>409</sup> In other words, thinking is always and necessarily directed to its objects, i.e., it is inherently relational. Whatever comes into contact with our consciousness, it is accessible to it, in one way or another. For instance, we can say that all sound is always the sound *of* something and imagining ‘pure sound in itself’ is futile.<sup>410</sup> With this in mind,

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Introduction to Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 2001), xxxix.

<sup>409</sup> Indeed, “taking off from... Husserl’s descriptions of transcendental intersubjectivity in *Cartesian Meditations*, Lévinas began... identifying and describing, in painstaking detail, irreducible differences between the intentional relation to objects, on the one hand, and the “ethical relation” to other human beings, on the other.” Tarek R. Dika, *Quiet Powers of the Possible: Interviews in Contemporary French Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>410</sup> Heidegger uses this example in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

we can start unpacking Levinas's claim that our ethical relation with the other is non- or pre-phenomenological. What this means is that the other does not present itself to us for reflection, knowledge, recognition, or identification. The other does not come to us from the world, understood as the totality of exchanges and the deadly web of similarities. It thus runs counter to intentionality and understanding, for true otherness rejects being subsumed under any familiarity. Indeed, there is nothing to be known in advance about the other that I encounter. It is, as Drabinski puts it, "an experience without concept."<sup>411</sup> Understanding the world as the closed, barely escapable totality amounts to war,<sup>412</sup> for every individual is stripped of his or her singularity, reduced to identity and sameness, and as such exists in the relation of struggle with others. We put our survival first because, Levinas would argue, we are not fully aware of the pure singularity of otherness, due to the totalizing nature of the world. As Moati puts it,

totalization entails a requisitioning of absolutes, a process through which it strips individuals of their own identities in order to transform them into instruments of the historical process. In the participation in history, being signifies nothing more than being a link, a tiny part of a totality which aims to relentlessly mobilize individuals in spite of themselves.<sup>413</sup>

Let us then go back to the idea that ethics or, more precisely, the encounter with absolute otherness,<sup>414</sup> is first philosophy, which is to say, first ethics. In other words, an encounter

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<sup>411</sup> John Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>412</sup> "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality. Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war? The state of war suspends morality...." Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21.

<sup>413</sup> Raoul Moati, *Levinas and the Night Of Being: A Guide To Totality And Infinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>414</sup> It is important not to understand this alterity negatively, for "the Other is not for Levinas a negative figure of the I, but a figure of excess that breaks up our thinking." Bernasconi, "The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien" in *The Face of*

with suffering precedes our conceptual mastery of the world. What Levinas is seeking to accomplish is to describe a kind of relation with the other that is outside understanding (whose ‘crime,’ we recall, is the erasure of the other’s pure alterity by subsuming it under the familiar categories of thinking) and the world, the world that traps otherness in its web of relation and equivalences, thus foreclosing the possibility of its appearance. Why the talk of first philosophy though? Here we must position Levinas vis-à-vis Martin Heidegger. In his 1927 magnum opus *Being and Time*, Heidegger set out to investigate the problem of being through the lens of one who takes up being as their own issue, i.e., the human being. In the early Heidegger, ontology is construed as fundamental and, importantly, the human being becomes its enabling condition, since it is the human individual who first raises the question of being. We read further on, “the whole of humanity is ontology. An individual’s scientific work, his or her affective life, the satisfaction of his or her needs and labour, his or her social life and death.... all these moments articulate, with a rigour which reserves to each a determinate function, the comprehension of being or truth.”<sup>415</sup> “Our entire civilization,” Levinas adds, “follows from this comprehension.”<sup>416</sup>

It is the precedence of comprehension and ontology, the reign of what is open to cognitive grasp, that precludes otherness for Levinas. He goes on to say that “comprehension, as construed by Heidegger, rejoins the great tradition of Western philosophy wherein to comprehend the particular being is already to place oneself beyond

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*the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 82.

<sup>415</sup> Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), PDF pagination.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

the particular. It is to relate to the particular, which alone exists, by knowledge which is always knowledge of the universal.”<sup>417</sup> Thus, the possibility of alterity is annihilated because the work of comprehension is to subsume the individualities or particularities under the universals, to render them faceless and generic, i.e., expendable. The ethical encounter must take place outside of comprehension and ontology “because in our relation with the Other, he or she does not affect us in terms of a concept.”<sup>418</sup> It is in this sense that we encounter otherness prior to comprehension and being, which, according to Levinas, are inextricably yoked together.

Let us examine the idea of the absolute other in a greater detail, given its pivotal role in Levinas’s thinking. The other presents itself to us as a jolt, as the pure alterity that cannot be subsumed under any categories of our understanding and that we cannot intend because we know nothing of it. We can only *experience* it. The event of the other is pure immediacy, a decisive rupture in the habituality of our life. Indeed, “Levinas’s immediacy breaks through all kinds of mediations, be it laws, rules, codes, rituals, social roles or any other kind of order.” “The otherness or strangeness of the other,” we read further, “manifests itself as the extraordinary par excellence..... not as something given or intended, but as a certain disquietude... which puts us out of our common tracks.”<sup>419</sup> The other ruptures the totality and familiarity of the world, since its radical alterity forecloses the possibility of putting it into any worldly relation and thus of integrating it

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels, “Levinas and the Face of the Other” *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 63.

into the world. As Drabinski succinctly puts it, “the Other as foreign produces a traumatism.”<sup>420</sup>

Furthermore, the other presents itself in its proper ethical intensity when it addresses us as the face.<sup>421</sup> Levinas seems to agree with one of the basic insights of phenomenology that things appear to us on a horizon, on the cusp of the world understood as the vast, complex network of multiple phenomena. Which is to say, as we saw a moment ago, that things stand out vis-à-vis the background of the visible or the sensible. Conversely, the face calls out to us as an outside of the visible, as something we by definition cannot point to. Musing on the category of the face, Levinas writes, “to manifest oneself as a face is to impose oneself above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation... without the intermediary of any image, in one’s nudity, that is, in one’s destitution and hunger.”<sup>422</sup> Thus, according to Levinas, what truly jolts us is the nakedness and the foreignness of the human, a kind of other-than-me.

For Levinas, the face must be understood first of all as an epiphany, i.e., as a revelation of the extra-worldly, a rupture in the fabric of all our knowledge and expectations, not to mention the horizon of the visible. It thus inaugurates the visible, it sheds light on what was previously obscured, as opposed to unfolding within it, which echoes the idea that no matter how fast light travels, darkness or obscurity is always already there. The epiphany of the face, we recall, necessarily precedes comprehension,

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<sup>420</sup> Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 122.

<sup>421</sup> It is worth noting that “the otherness does not lie behind the surface of somebody we see, hear, touch and violate. It is just his or her otherness. It is the other as such and not some aspect of him or her that is condensed in the face.” Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*

understanding, or thought as such. In this way, the face is not an image, concept, or idea, since to trap it in any of those categories would be to rob it of its infinite, incalculable strangeness. It is more like a trace, a jolt into the strangeness of the non-I. The face appears “in the nudity of the absolute openness of the transcendent.”<sup>423</sup> We could say that the face enters the realm of the visible as vulnerable precisely because it is *not* enmeshed in the network of things, images, or ideas, because it lacks any horizontal or material support, and it is stripped of any possible protection. But I will return to this notion of vulnerability later.

Since the face of the other does not partake of the world as totality, it shows itself precisely as transcendence. Indeed, “the relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence, and leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist.”<sup>424</sup> We can say that the face enters into the visible as an interruption, a disturbance of totality, and as transcendence, which I am interpreting as a particular kind of experience. It is an event that happens in the fissures between our comprehension, the mind’s synthetic activity, and the inevitable subsumption of the particular under the universal. It falls through the cracks of being and its totalization.<sup>425</sup>

Thus, Levinas argues that the other is fundamentally irreducible to any concept or knowledge we might have of him or her, which is also why, roughly speaking, alterity has been exiled from being understood as cognitive transparency and familiarity. Why is

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>425</sup> Moati raises an interesting possibility of “the nocturnal productivity of being.” He asks, “Must we go beyond ontology or expose a transcendence hitherto unnoticed within the fully developed work of being and without which the ontological question loses all intelligibility?” Raoul Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being*, xvi.

it so important to insist on the radical non-coincidence of the self and the other though, i.e., why insist on *pure* alterity? If we think of the other in terms of reciprocity, symmetry ('she is so much like me!'), or equality, the obvious risk, the risk Levinas has been painstakingly attempting to neutralize, is that otherness will dissolve into the familiar. Which is to say, difference will be engulfed by the same, reasserting the primacy of self-interest and egoist pursuits. Thus, "height is the relation in which the face of the Other expresses his or her eminence."<sup>426</sup> Which is another way of asserting that otherness comes first.

As I already pointed out, the other that addresses me by virtue of her elusive presence is, according to Levinas, radically fragile in her fundamental humanity. It is the other *as* sheer uniqueness, irreducible to any social roles she might later play. The vulnerable humanity of the other stirs a kind of primary care within me, it stops me in my tracks, which is what makes this relation intrinsically asymmetrical. According to Levinas, "the nakedness of the face extends into the nakedness of the body that is cold and that is ashamed of its nakedness."<sup>427</sup> He goes on to say, "the face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger."<sup>428</sup> Thus, in encountering the other, I encounter the utmost destitution, which elicits a response from me, yet this response, Levinas argues, cannot happen in the totalized world of commerce and exchange relations. To put it slightly differently, I am compelled to show care toward the other not because she owes me some favor or because I hope to gain something in return, which would strongly resemble the circulation of economic exchanges and

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<sup>426</sup> Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 119.

<sup>427</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*

therefore sameness and replaceability, but because I no longer see my interests as primary. The otherness can thus be maintained only if the self surrenders itself to the other without expecting anything in return.

Let me now further examine the conjunction of the other with destitution or suffering, since it is precisely the suffering of the other that will bring us back to the questions of evil, superfluity and moral urgency. As Levinas poignantly writes, “the nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give.”<sup>429</sup> Insofar as the other does not manifest him- or herself in the world, he or she is radically deprived of any protections or guarantees the world might offer. In other words, alterity cannot subsist in the world without moral giving. If, according to Levinas, the essence of inhabiting the world amounts to the totality of relatively indistinguishable individuals who struggle for their own survival against all others, the absolute other appears to us beyond this perpetual struggle, defenseless, unable or refusing to defend him- or herself. The other is thus the antithesis of war and egocentric struggle, since it appears before good and evil and before peace and violence,<sup>430</sup> i.e., as precisely other to all distinctions.<sup>431</sup> Levinas goes on to say, “the transcendence of the Other, which is his eminence, his height, his lordship, in its concrete meaning includes his destitution, his exile...”<sup>432</sup> The other’s arising above the world, insofar as it must be disengaged from every relation in order to maintain its absolute otherness, paradoxically goes hand in hand with the *concrete* manifestation of the other

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>430</sup> In other words, the other appears prior to the *choice* between good or evil and between peace or violence.

<sup>431</sup> This is problematic because the distinction between suffering and well-being is clearly at play in Levinas’s construal of otherness.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.



as hungry and destitute. The epiphany of the face, Levinas continues, “consists in soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.”<sup>433</sup> The figure of absolute otherness that falls through the fissures of being makes a quiet entrance into the world insofar as our concrete, embodied life is haunted by the incomprehensible, the senseless, the foreign, and the mysterious, i.e., the traces of otherness.

One major difference here from Ophir *and* Amery is that we are exempt from judging whether a concrete other in front of us is in dire need of relief, is able to provide help to someone else, or is suffering, but their circumstances are fortunate enough to allow them to wait for relief. The Levinasian other suspends all judgments and distinction, since the absolute other is *always* condemned to suffering. Simply put, Levinas remains silent on the possibility that there is an other who is *not* destitute or suffering. The other appears univocally destitute, suffering, hungry, before any distinctions or determinations, demanding our response. Absolute otherness and suffering fundamentally coincide, which is an enigmatic and provocative idea I will be exploring here. Let us note that one’s responsibility to the other is presented as inescapable and infinite, such that no measure will ever be enough.<sup>434</sup> What I will attempt to do later is to allow for the possibility of alterity *and* judgment, thereby conjoining the two.

Let me now turn to the Levinasian supposition that the other appears in and *creates* affective time, already implicit in the language of jolts, ruptures, and traumatism, as distinct from the representational or biological ticking of the clock, which introduces

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>434</sup> See Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.

the idea that the encounter with the other creates a different sense of time in the addressee, to expand on the link between time and morality.<sup>435</sup> In experiencing the jolt of the other, the subject feels “taken hostage.”<sup>436</sup> Levinas goes on to say that, in coming face-to-face with the other, “I am... already late and guilty for being late,”<sup>437</sup> which could be interpreted as suggesting that my responsibility for the other originates in the past I can never remember, that the other ruptures my sense of chronological time and shows the limit to my recollection and, in fact, my life-history and my subjectivity.<sup>438</sup> According to Levinas, the command of the other comes “as though from an immemorial past, which was never present.”<sup>439</sup> The responsibility that was always within me now becomes fully activated. The jolt of the other has its own temporality and it indexes the feeling of being taken hostage, which, using contemporary parlance, is the kind of traumatic blow to subjectivity and something that inaugurates a new temporality and a new beginning. As we read,

the time of the Other and my time, or the times of mineness, ecstatic temporalities, do not occur at the same time. Veritable time, in Levinas’s sense, is the effect or event of the disjointed conjunction of these two different times: the time of the Other disrupts or interrupts my temporality. It is this upset, this insertion of the Other’s time into mine, that establishes the alterity of veritable time, which is neither the Other’s time nor mine.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> According to Severson, time is a gift of the other to me. See Eric Severson, *Levinas’s Philosophy of Time: Gift, Responsibility, Diachrony, Hope* (New York: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 103.

<sup>436</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 11.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>438</sup> I take this to mean that the addressee feels obligated to respond to the other’s suffering *without* discerning a particular reason to do so in one’s lifetime. The immemorial past that I cannot recall stands for the groundlessness for my visceral desire to offer help to the other.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>440</sup> Introduction to Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, 12.

Thus, the temporalities of the subject and the other fracture and mingle. They are out of joint with the world and its innumerable clocks. The subject wounded by the absolute poverty and the demand of the other is allowed “neither to substitute a more acceptable demand for a measureless one, nor to put forward the impossibility of an adequate response in order to not respond or to transfer my responsibility to someone supposedly more qualified.”<sup>441</sup> This is “a traumatism of astonishment.”<sup>442</sup> The language of trauma, I believe, signals a shift from conceptual thinking to what is affective and visceral. The self is intensified to the highest possible degree by encountering the pure other such that the self, in giving up his or her autonomy, becomes synonymous with giving, sacrifice, and suffering. Indeed, “the subject is traumatized, loses its balance, its moderation, its recuperative powers, its autonomy, its principle and principles, is shaken out of its contemporaneousness with the world and others, owing to the impact of a moral force: the asymmetrical height and destitution of the Other.”<sup>443</sup> Thus, encountering suffering in its pure alterity already implies the unbearable time that crushes and overwhelms us, given its ‘work’ of shattering. Experiencing suffering as alterity ruptures and mutilates the time-sense both of the addressee and the sufferer, locking both in a shared temporality.

Levinas calls the temporality of the subject vis-à-vis what I am calling the otherness of suffering “diachrony” [*diachronie*], i.e., that which fractures the continuous duration of the subjective life into ‘lapses’ and tiny needles of time that have no common

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<sup>441</sup> Rudolph Bernet, “The Traumatized Subject,” *Research in Phenomenology* 30 (2000): pp. 160-179.

<sup>442</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.

<sup>443</sup> Introduction to Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 15.

measure among them.”<sup>444</sup> The opposite of this is synchrony, which is a kind of synthesis, an easy flow where the past and the future create the present.<sup>445</sup> The rupture of the subjective consciousness with its sense of time is irreversible, “since all efforts at recuperation on the part of the traumatized subject are doomed to failure.”<sup>446</sup> Diachrony is thus the time-sense of the subject that has been forever separated from its habitual sameness after encountering alterity.<sup>447</sup>

While the other may be understood as a ‘placeholder’ for all concrete others, the others marred by the false familiarity imposed on them, or a trace of otherness found in all human beings, I want to return to the coincidence of disaster and alterity now understood *as an event of affectivity qua suffering. It is no longer otherwise than being or otherwise than me and my survival, but otherwise than human life worthy of its name.*

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<sup>444</sup> Bernet, “The Traumatized Subject,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 174.

<sup>445</sup> To my mind, this notion of synchrony also helps us understand the Levinasian rejection of aesthetics, expressed most vividly in his essay “Reality and its shadow.” In our fascination with an artwork’s own rhythm and temporality, we become indifferent to the fact that someone else’s experience of time is pure agony and that someone else’s anguished enduring can be altered. As Levinas writes, “there is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague.” It seems that both thinkers would agree that at least some of those who have undergone deep suffering know how insignificant, easy, and altogether trivial the solace of aesthetic experience really is. In short, I would like to take seriously the idea that aesthetic experience is foreclosed for those whose lives have been shattered, as well as the idea that the fascination and the *ease* of temporal flow it harbors within it can be a source of shame for those who *witnessed* the shattering. See Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 142.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>447</sup> Once again, going against the traditional accounts of time, Levinas opens up the possibility that a jolt of suffering or trauma does and can initiate a radically new timeline. For Husserl, for instance, synthetic consciousness (the relationship between new impressions and what has preceded them) has to do with active synthesis. It is this relationship or connection that’s called into question by what Levinas describes as the jolt of the face-to-face encounter. See Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2013), pp. 260-61.

Importantly, I am *not* suggesting that an event of suffering replaces “Heidegger’s focus on anguish with some other experience,” as Bernasconi elucidates.<sup>448</sup> We are not transitioning from one psychological register to the next. Rather, to encounter pure otherness is to experience and be traumatized by the highest intensity of suffering that lurks in multiple embodied others. This is to say, to confront otherness is to confront the brutality of suffering, the unbearable suffering that negates all our worldly relations and all our cognitive attempts to master it, that mutilates our time-sense, our mind, and our body.

In other words, I am interpreting the other not as the pure, grandiose, eminent alterity, understood as the apotheosis of individuality, that incites our moral impulses and responsibility, but rather as a confrontation with and a glimpse into intolerable suffering. My argument is that the eidetic description of suffering gleaned from Ophir and Amery strongly resembles the Levinasian traumatic, overpowering alterity, as well as the belief that the category of suffering does more practical work in ethics than saturated singularity. Indeed, I would argue that Levinas powerfully and astutely delineates the conditions under which it is possible to encounter naked suffering, such that the encounter in question no longer belongs to the domain of sentimental imagination or the idiosyncrasies of one’s character and the degrees of moral sensibility. Furthermore, it is possible to encounter suffering *qua* suffering precisely when we refuse to subsume it under equivalences and empty generalities, reinstating the universal human condition of withering and mortality, where, if everyone suffers, no one truly is. To be sure, this is a significant interpretative difference from Levinas’s word, if not *the* difference. Instead of

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<sup>448</sup> Bernasconi, “No Exit: Levinas’ Aporetic Account of Transcendence,” *Research in Phenomenology*, Volume 35, Issue 1, pp. 101-117, especially 103.

reinstating absolute otherness as the conceptual saturation of forever elusive, unknowable humanity, an encounter with which seeks to undermine the sameness of being, I am appropriating the term to suggest the same otherness, except it is the pure otherness of suffering.

What's more, we interpret alterity as the core of suffering because the other is *always* destitute, which is the same as reasserting the equivalence of the victims, i.e., something I have been attempting to dismantle. Simply put, not every other is suffering and it stands to reason that we encounter concrete others in distress and concrete others in their well-being. Separating otherness *qua* humanity and suffering, noting that the shift in question is strictly moral, as we never encounter suffering as an abstraction and in isolation, allows us to re-introduce judgment into our comportment in the world. This is not possible as long as the absolute suffering remains uniquely singular.

If the other pins us to our subjectivity, the interiority we cannot escape and the responsibility we cannot transfer, Levinas argues that it “signifies not to be able to get out from under responsibility.”<sup>449</sup> This reading of responsibility, as we are about to see, is markedly different from the one we are traditionally used to, wherein it is inseparable from the question of freedom and agency. Indeed, as Burggraeve points out, “since the Enlightenment, anyone viewing the world through Western lens has become used to thinking of responsibility as the extension of, and even the synonym for, autonomy and freedom.”<sup>450</sup> For the other undoes our habitual mastery, we, paradoxically, do not take up responsibility by choice, but by necessity. Thus, “the origin that precedes freedom comes

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<sup>449</sup> Levinas, “On the Trail of the Other,” *Philosophy Today*, 10:1 (1966: Spring), 41.

<sup>450</sup> Roger Burggraeve, “Violence and the vulnerable face of the other: the vision of Emmanuel Levinas on moral evil and our responsibility,” *Critical Assessments*, 66.

from the outside. The origin of ethical subjectivity precedes the boundaries within which the origin may be recuperated. Therefore this conditioning from the outside, this origination, gives birth to the subject.”<sup>451</sup> This is something we saw in our brief discussion of immemorial past.

Blanchot gives us a few illuminating hints for deciphering the meaning of the Levinasian responsibility, in a passage that is worth citing in its entirety:

responsible: this word generally qualifies – in a prosaic, bourgeois manner – a mature, lucid, conscientious man, who acts with circumspection, who takes into account all elements of a given situation, calculates and decides. The word ‘responsible’ qualifies the successful man of action. But now responsibility – my responsibility for the other, for everyone without reciprocity – is displaced. No longer does it belong to consciousness; it is not an activating thought process put into practice, nor is it even a duty that would impose itself from without and from within... Responsibility which withdraws me from my order – perhaps from all orders and order itself – responsibility which separates me from myself (from the ‘me’ that is mastery and power, from the free speaking subject) and reveals the other in place of me, requires that I answer for absence, for passivity.<sup>452</sup>

Thus, the responsibility at stake here is not one that reinforces one’s sense of agency, but rather dissolves it, puts it out of work. The encounter with pure otherness weakens us, as it were. The word “responsibility,” Blanchot goes on to say, with a superb poignancy, is “summoning us to turn toward the disaster.”<sup>453</sup> To embrace one’s responsibility for the other is to give up agency and to accept the moral summon from the outside. It is to turn toward the disaster of a suffering other. The suffering already exists by the time the subject arrives on the scene, if only because otherwise it could and would have been prevented.

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<sup>451</sup> Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 121.

<sup>452</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

As Levinas himself writes, “I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity.... I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed...”<sup>454</sup> Thus, responsibility and the other are inextricably tied, i.e., to be responsible is to face up to the destitution of the other and be at his or her command, which is also to say that the other awakens my responsibility for the first time. The way I propose to interpret this as the idea that our sense of responsibility acquires a piercing acuity once I clash with the pure affectivity of suffering. Nothing short of the senselessness and the brutality of suffering can jolt us into being responsible and into recoiling in the face of absolute distress.<sup>455</sup>

What continuously draws the self to the other is desire, which Levinas distinguishes from need. The latter, he writes, is “the return itself, the anxiety of me for myself, the original form of identification which we have called egoism.”<sup>456</sup> Which is to say, need is about identification, about returning to myself to fulfill my needs, i.e., it is antithetical to otherness. Desire, on the other hand, is something very different, for it is what animates the movement from the self to the other. Indeed, desire “proceeds from a being already full and independent.”<sup>457</sup> It is not concerned with satisfying any needs of the self, making the well-being of the other its primary goal. As such, desire is not an appetite, implying the aim of satiating yourself, but rather a generosity.<sup>458</sup> According to Jobling, “desire goes to the Other not in order for the self to fulfill itself, to find its own

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<sup>454</sup> Levinas, “Ethics and Infinity,” *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 95.

<sup>455</sup> To be sure, recognizing suffering is not enough. At best, it will generate a moral desire to offer relief. We need the tools and the concepts Ophir outlined for us to decide on appropriate measures with regard to this suffering.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., “On the Trail of The Other,” *Philosophy Today*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., “Ethics as First Philosophy” in *The Levinas Reader*, pp. 254-255.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., “On the Trail of the Other,” *Philosophy Today*, 39.



identity, or to facilitate its self-totalization.”<sup>459</sup> Importantly, what is desirable never quite fulfills the desire, deepening and intensifying it itself, creating the hunger anew. This is to ensure that the desirous movement from the self to the other never depletes itself, never grows bored and satisfied, thus threatening to destabilize the key link between the subject and the other. Indeed, “the Subject is perpetually striving towards the Other in a movement that never comes to rest because the desired does not satisfy the hunger.”<sup>460</sup> We can understand this as a visceral desire to alleviate someone else’s suffering.

To reiterate, I submit that the subject’s responsibility binds him- or herself not to the absolute other, which can be easily mistaken for the sum-total of all (universally finite and thus equally vulnerable) victims and even for ‘the perfect victim’ that we are to see in every concrete other, but rather to the alterity of suffering, since experiencing its deadly force is tied to the desire *to do something about it*. In other words, I am affectively and fatefully drawn to the distress of a concrete other not because of the Kantian idea of dignity that summons us to moral action as the form of the law, as tempting an appeal to the Kantian moral law may be,<sup>461</sup> but because brute suffering stops us in our tracks and we experience its superfluity, that it ought not to be. The fundamental relation between

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<sup>459</sup> D. Jobling, 1991. “Levinas on desire, dialogue and the Other,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65: 419.

<sup>460</sup> Ezekiel Mkhwanazi, “To be human is to be responsible for the Other: a critical analysis of Levinas’ conception of responsibility,” *Phronimon*, 137.

<sup>461</sup> Derrida admits that the regulative idea remains, for lack of anything better, if we can say “lack of anything better” with regard to a regulative idea, a last resort. Although such a last resort or final recourse risks becoming an alibi, it retains a certain dignity. I cannot swear that I will not one day give in to it.” At the risk of criminally oversimplifying the matter, I take the appeal of the moral law to lie in its force to stir a veritable compulsion in us to do the right thing, so to speak, while remaining groundless, without a universally accessible reason and without a why. Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 83.

the subject and pure suffering tears a hole in the fabric of subjectivity, such that the subject can no longer be at peace as long as this suffering is continuing.

Let me illustrate my point with a reference to my personal experience. When my late fiancé started his aggressive treatment for the advanced form of cancer, I *knew*, heartbreakingly and yet lucidly, that the dehumanizing procedures would change him (I dutifully studied medical literature, read the accounts of the significant others of the deceased ones, listened to the stories of the few survivors) and that things would be rough, to say the least. Very, very rough. But when I saw his stone-still posture, immovable in his silent brute suffering, the living statue of intolerable pain and fear, as he was sitting on my bed, I felt like I was punched in my stomach and I knew this act of witnessing claimed me cruelly and wholly. I *knew* what was coming, but, in the Levinasian fashion, my cognitive faculties could not prepare for encountering his pure suffering. My mind knew, but my body and the affective kernel of my psyche did not. This runs counter to Scarry's claim that "for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty,' while for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt.'"<sup>462</sup> Experiencing the suffering of the other outside of any relations, without any protective mediation, to the point where you are undone by its force and surrender your agency, understood as the concern for your own needs and existence, undermines the traditional dichotomy between the iron certainty of pain and its alleged incommunicability, where pain is fully accessible only to the sufferer and remains at best as a faint affective trace in

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<sup>462</sup> Scarry, *Thinking in an Emergency*, 4.

the witness, usually something the witness has to be convinced of. Of course, the alleged incomprehensibility of pain has the social function of furthering our indifference to it, as if comprehension were truly at stake here. Furthermore, I want to suggest that what is central about equating human otherness with suffering is that we begin to see the shards of this acute suffering in concrete others, catching the glimpses of alterity in them, just like I was devastated by the suffering I saw in the corporeality of my late fiancé, the suffering that, temporarily, stripped him of all familiarity.

This is a key insight that I would like us to hold on to, since pain or suffering has been twinned with unspeakability almost unfailingly, as I alluded to earlier, forcing this experience even deeper into silence and isolating the sufferers from the rest of humanity.<sup>463</sup> For instance, as Felman writes, in response to Claude Lanzmann film *Shoah*, claimed that the victims of traumatic events are essentially voiceless, by arguing that “the inside is unintelligible.”<sup>464</sup> The major problem here is that victims are denied any truths to their unbearable, fractured experience ‘in turmoil,’ condemning them ever further to deep loneliness and the absence of meaningful dialogue, and deepening the gap between those who have experienced suffering and those who have not.

For instance, in writing about the incurable illness and the subsequent loss of his little daughter, Hemon states, in an unbearable lucidity, that

one of the most common platitudes we heard was that *words failed*. But words were not failing Teri and me at all. It was not true that there was no way to

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<sup>463</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Hirsch expresses informed and thoughtful opposition to this view. See Marianne Hirsch, “The witness in the archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies,” *Memory Studies*, 1750-6980, Vol 2(2): pp. 151-170.

<sup>464</sup> Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, 231. See also Claude Lanzmann, “The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann,” ed. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*.

describe our experience. Teri and I had plenty of language with which to talk to each other about the horror of what was happening, and talk we did. The words of Dr. Fangusaro and Dr. Lulla, always painfully pertinent, were not failing, either. If there was a communication problem, it was that there were too many words, and they were far too heavy and too specific to be inflicted on others. [...] We instinctively protected our friends from the knowledge we possessed; we let them think that words had failed, because we knew that they didn't want to learn the vocabulary we used daily. We were sure that they didn't want to know what we knew; we didn't want to know it, either.<sup>465</sup>

Words do not fail us when we suffer. *We* fail to speak or to listen. The thing is, we, the listeners, are too afraid to know and to imagine.

Amery himself affirms the idea that there is something in the experience of suffering that fundamentally resists language:

the pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart (*mit-teilen*) his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself."<sup>466</sup>

On the face of it, little, if anything, can be known about suffering, for to understand pain is to inflict it. This radical incommunicability often marks the limit of moral concern, for how can I truly take up an other's predicament as my own if I cannot relate to it either experientially, cognitively, or affectively? In other words, how do we bridge the abyss between someone who has undergone torment and someone, to speak poetically for a moment, who has seen this torment on the other's face and in their eyes? Needless to say, the more we condemn suffering to incommunicability, the less chance we have of understanding how to dissipate it.

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<sup>465</sup> Aleksandar Hemon, "The Aquarium: A child's isolating illness." *The New Yorker*, June 13 & 20, 2011 Issue, accessed on 09/25/2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/06/13/the-aquarium>

<sup>466</sup> Amery, "Torture," *At the Mind's Limits*, 34.

Just listen to Blanchot once again, who muses, “I was going to write that she was like a statue, because she was motionless and turned towards the window, and she really did have the look of a statue; but stone was not part of her element; rather, her nature was composed of fear—not an insane or monstrous fear, but one expressed by these words: for her, something irremediable had happened.”<sup>467</sup> We are taken hostage by absolute suffering when we discern the traces of the irredeemable even in those individuals we considered thoroughly familiar. In other words, the event of pure suffering is linked to experiencing the wounding and alien shards of torment in concrete, embodied others, as if the original purity of suffering dissipated into a million burning needles, lodged in particular minds and bodies.

It is worth noting that, despite the Levinasian hyperbolic extra-worldly language, he does attempt to understand responsibility in very concrete terms, i.e., to reconcile the moral summon from above with the moral need to respond to *specific* individuals, in *specific* circumstances, and with *specific* measures to reduce their pain. The drama of transcendence cannot solve the problems that are causing damage to concrete people. In Levinas’s own words, “the duty to give to the Other even the bread out of one’s own mouth and the coat from one’s shoulders.”<sup>468</sup> We should emphasize that the giving in question does not take place because the subject has an excess of goods to give. Should this be the case, the subject would still remain aligned with his or her own interests and needs, within its egoist world. Rather, in the movement of sacrifice and the surrender of one’s agency, the subject gives what he or she needs him- or herself.<sup>469</sup> Indeed, “in

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<sup>467</sup> Blanchot, *Death Sentence* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1998), 39.

<sup>468</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 55.

<sup>469</sup> Simone Weil, having starved herself to death, in solidarity with the poor, would

Levinasian responsibility we venture outside the permissible limits of exteriority's obligating force, for instance, in the form of the Kantian duty, to find ourselves far more obligated than we imagined, subjects suddenly not to obligations of our choosing but, rather, to what lies beyond our culturally self-limiting constructs of obligation."<sup>470</sup> The call of responsibility is made possible by exteriority, which highlights its arresting, irresistible force, the force of subsuming the ego.

Let us note that in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas uses the term "the-one-for-the-other" [*l'un pour l'autre*] to designate the relation of responsibility between the self and the other, as opposed to "Being-for-itself," which is a mode of being where the subject is concerned only with him- or herself, oblivious to the other. This is known as the vexing Levinasian notion of 'substitution,' which is the process "whereby identity is inverted, a passivity more passive still than all passivity, beyond the passivity of the identical, the self is freed from itself."<sup>471</sup> As cryptic as this may sound, what Levinas seems to have in mind here is the breaking free from the sickening familiarity and circularity of our thoughts (the circularity we are exposed to in the throes of insomnia), our interiority to which we are chained and with which we are nauseatingly familiar, and orient ourselves toward the radically non-I. In a conversation with Jill Robbins, Levinas elucidates more what substitution may look like,

for me, the notion of substitution is tied to the notion of responsibility. To substitute oneself does not amount to putting oneself in the place of the other man in order to feel what he feels; it does not involve becoming the other nor, if he be destitute and desperate, the courage of such a trial. Rather, substitution entails

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certainly be an exemplary Levinasian subject, as problematic as it is. Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, 89.

<sup>470</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust and the Unjust Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>471</sup> Levinas, "Substitution," *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 90.

bringing comfort by associating ourselves with the essential weakness and finitude of the other; it is to bear his weight while sacrificing one's interestedness and complacency-in-being, which then turn into responsibility for the other. In human existence, there is, as it were, interrupting or surpassing the vocation of being, another vocation: that of the other... All of the culture of the humans seems to me to be oriented by this new "plot," in which the in-itself of a being persisting in its being is surpassed in the gratuity of being outside-of-oneself, for the other, in the act of sacrifice or the possibility of sacrifice, in holiness.<sup>472</sup>

It is thus about entering into the ethical relation par excellence, one where the subject is summoned into existence, at least morally, by an encounter with the other's weakness and vulnerability. Following Bernasconi, however, we ask, "What kind of subject is needed to fulfill Levinas's moral demands?"<sup>473</sup> As I suggested a moment ago, the passage from the self to the other in substitution allows for acting without self-interest in a kind of moral obsession with radical alterity. In other words, "substitution means: to put myself in the other's place, not to appropriate him or her according to my wishes, but to offer to the other what he or she needs, starting with basic material needs. To be an I is to substitute for the other."<sup>474</sup>

Paradoxically then, the subject exists only in departing from itself and from giving up its needs. Levinas writes, "it is through the condition of being a hostage that there can be pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity in the world."<sup>475</sup> Which is to say, that compassion is directly tied into the surrender of one's agency and freedom or overturning the primacy of the self. In short, "this suggests that Levinas is asking what

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid., "It Righteous To Be?" ed. Jill Robbins, *Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, (Stanford: Stanford, 2001), 228.

<sup>473</sup> Bernasconi, "To which question is 'substitution' the answer?" *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 240.

<sup>474</sup> Kajornpat Tangyin, "Reading Levinas on Ethical Responsibility," accessed on 08/20/2017,

[https://www.academia.edu/606687/Reading\\_Levinas\\_on\\_Ethical\\_Responsibility](https://www.academia.edu/606687/Reading_Levinas_on_Ethical_Responsibility)

<sup>475</sup> Levinas, "Substitution," *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 91.

underlies that behaviour which is sometimes called supererogatory, gratuitous or, as he prefers to say, ethical.”<sup>476</sup> Levinas thus rejects the idea that at the heart of subjectivity lies a concern with one’s self or, more precisely, that it has any place in morality. Rather, he posits an encounter with absolute suffering as the ‘exterior,’ strange, even uncanny center of ethical subjectivity. Furthermore, we read, “substitution of the one for the Other is not the psychological event of compassion, but a putting oneself in the place of the Other.... it is the asymmetry of responsibility.”<sup>477</sup>

Let me say a bit more about the subject who assumes its responsibility through passivity and the work of substitution, so as to return to the question of suffering. To do so, I will turn to Levinas’s essay “Useless Suffering” where he addresses the way in which suffering destroys all our cognitive mastery, will, and agency, i.e., all our interiority. He opens the essay as follows: “Suffering is, of course, a *datum* in consciousness, a certain ‘psychological content,’ similar to the lived experience of color, sound, contact, or any other sensation. But in this very ‘content’ it is an in-spite-of-consciousness, the unassumable.” This is to say, while, in accordance with the practice of phenomenology, it is possible to examine every object as it is given *to us* when we step back from the world, there is something about the phenomenon of suffering that resists this appropriation. This is also going against the Kantian drama of consciousness. As he puts it, “for Kant, an imperative weighs on the understanding. Understanding is understanding according to principles. Understanding is under an imperative to synthesize disparate data according to the universal and the necessary.” “As soon as there

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<sup>476</sup> Bernasconi, “To which question is ‘substitution’ the answer?” *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 235.

<sup>477</sup> Bloechl, *The Face of the Other*, 87.



is understanding,” Levinas continues, “understanding understands that it is under an imperative that there he law.”<sup>478</sup> Again, to frame otherness conceptually is to erase it. “Facts,” he goes on to say, “can be represented as facts only by an understanding that apprehends them in universal and necessary forms of judgment. The imperative is the *a priori* fact that precedes and makes possible the a priori forms with which understanding understands empirical facts.”<sup>479</sup> However, we experience suffering in a fundamentally different, singular way, light years away from the way we experience all other things in the world.

Suffering eludes the grasp of our mind, even though the synthetic activity of consciousness “is capable of reuniting and embracing the most heterogeneous and disparate data into order and meaning in its a priori forms.”<sup>480</sup> To put it yet differently, for Husserl, the life of consciousness resides ultimately in synthesis, i.e., making sense of what presents itself to consciousness. For Levinas, suffering is the insertion of a refusal of signification into consciousness whose life or drama otherwise consists in unification. It is what violently tears apart consciousness and its primeval thirst for meaning. It is the unbearable that cannot be integrated into our consciousness. Finally, it is the unassumable due to its excess over our ordinary forms of intelligibility.

As Levinas goes on to say, “suffering, in its woe, in its in-spite-of-consciousness, is passivity.” Passivity has traditionally been understood as the opposite of activity, but here he proposes both a more basic and more radical conception of passivity, the passivity that is not a simple opposition to activity. The way we are passive in relation to

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<sup>478</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 260.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>480</sup> Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *Entre-Nous*, 91.

our own suffering is different from the passivity of our sensibility in relation to the things we perceive. To perceive is to be receptive to what presents itself to us, but this passivity of reception is also active in that it contains and arranges concepts by which we recognize and make sense of things. We subsume the things we encounter under the categories of our mind so as to make sense of them, which means that passivity runs deeper than receptivity. Indeed, Levinas sees Husserl as “a proponent of the primacy of cognitive, perceptual subjectivity.”<sup>481</sup> Thus, “in suffering, sensibility is a vulnerability, more passive than receptivity; an encounter more passive than experience. It is precisely an evil.”<sup>482</sup> According to Jules Simon’s elucidation, “playing on the double sense of the French word *mal*, which means either ‘pain’ or ‘evil,’ Levinas claims that suffering is not merely a restriction of one’s freedom, constricting possible spontaneous movements, but an overwhelming of one’s humanity so concretely violent and cruel that we can only describe such pain as evil or absurd.”<sup>483</sup> This overwhelming, i.e., suffering, is evil, unbearable, and absurd precisely because it is fundamentally useless. It serves no purpose, it has no meaning or justification, it has no story to tell and no promises to make, and is thus ‘for nothing.’ This suffering is the primeval scandal of human existence.

It is important to note that I do not see the encounter with the suffering other, interpreted here as the event of pure suffering, and the recognition of the shards of pain in concrete others chronologically, as if we first confronted the intensity of disembodied

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<sup>481</sup> Jackson, “Persecution and social histories: Towards an Adornian critique of Levinas,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36(6) 719–733, especially 725.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>483</sup> Jules Simon, “Making Ethical Sense of Useless Suffering with Levinas,” *Double Binds of Ethics After the Holocaust* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 134.

suffering and then discerned its dissemination in singular individuals. The two are simultaneous, but they belong to different orders. One is the order of affectivity, seeping through and surging above all relations, cognitive events, and our everyday dealings with each other, sometimes becoming a painfully tight affective knot binding our subjectivities together. The other order has to do with our way of inhabiting the world that is colored or darkened by this wounding affectivity and with what actions we undertake once it becomes part of our interiority. The latter is thus about the practical measures we take up in the face of suffering.

But what of the subject that comes before or prior to this encounter? How do we articulate the subjectivity that comes *before* the event of suffering, such that there *is* a subject capable of hearing the cry for help? Following Levinas, the primary subject's way of emerging and living in the world is through the enjoyment of the senses. Therefore, "Levinas seeks in sensibility what is anterior to the work of the constituting subject on the world."<sup>484</sup> As Peperzak helpfully elucidates, "the enjoyment of a corporeal and terrestrial existence is constitutive for any ego: the I establishes itself as a self through the absorption of elements, things, and events or by submitting them to the I's domination and possession."<sup>485</sup> I grow into my agency through everything the world lets me enjoy, as if the world were for me and for me alone. The world gives me sustenance, which allows me to become independent. As he goes on to say, "without this appropriating and hedonic egocentrism, there would be no relationship to other persons because this relation presupposes a basic level of individual independence, even if further analysis will show

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<sup>484</sup> Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 108.

<sup>485</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 24.

the relativity of this independence.”<sup>486</sup> The role of enjoyment is thus to articulate a subject that is irreducible to its *cogito*, mastery, or pure physical needs, i.e., the subject of enjoyment. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes,

We live from ‘good soup,’ air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc... These are not objects of representations. We live from them. Nor is what we live from a ‘means of life,’ as the pen is a means with respect to the letter it permits us to write—nor a goal of life, as communication is the goal of the letter. The things we live from are not tools, nor even implements, in the Heideggerian sense of the term. Their existence is not exhausted by the utilitarian schematism that delineates them as having the existence of hammers, needles, or machines.<sup>487</sup>

In other words, we live from the things we are surrounded by, oscillating between interiority and exteriority, even before we find uses for them and enter into an instrumental relation with the world. Indeed, we inhabit the enjoyment that various things afford us before we situate them within the worldly horizon. The self,<sup>488</sup> however, enjoys the world insofar as it experiences the world as existing for the sole benefit of the object:

the world, offers the bountifulness of terrestrial nourishment to our intentions — including those of Rabelais; the world where youth is happy and restless with desire is the world itself. It takes form not in an additional quality inhering in objects, but in a destination inscribed in its revelation, in the revelation itself, in the light. Objects are destined for me; they are for me. Desire as a relationship with the world involves both a distance between me and the desirable, and consequently a time ahead of me, and also a possession of the desirable which is prior to the desire. This position of the desirable, before and after the desire, is the fact that it is given. And the fact of being given is the world.<sup>489</sup>

This experience of the world as existing for the enjoyment of the creates the subject born out of affectivity, such that cognition comes only at its wake. Indeed, “enjoyment of the element does not belong to the order of thought but to that of sentiment, that is, the

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>487</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 92.

<sup>488</sup> As Levinas puts it, “enjoyment is the ultimate consciousness of all the contents that fill my life.” Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, PDF pagination.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

affectivity wherein the egoism of the I pulsates.”<sup>490</sup> Thus, the self is bound to the world first and foremost through sensibility and affectivity.

Only the subject that knows enjoyment, Levinas will later say, is able to sacrifice it. However, to enjoy what the world offers is also to assimilate difference into sameness, the other into the identical. Thus,

nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized, we will see, as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation. Hunger is need, is privation in the primal sense of the word, and thus precisely living from . . . is not a simple becoming conscious of what fills life. These contents are lived: they feed life. One lives one’s life: to live is a sort of transitive verb, and the contents of life are its direct objects.<sup>491</sup>

This vision of enjoyment, wherein we convert what is alien to us into what is identical, buttresses the autonomy of the subject, but, to be sure, not the self-sufficient subject of traditional philosophy, suspicious of any affects. I take this to mean that to present enjoyment as a mode of life as preceding intellect and rational mastery, utilitarian approach to the world, and the relation to others governed by the logic of exchange, Levinas grants the real force to the affective, since it undergirds and shores up our subjectivity. Indeed, “the subject of Enjoyment does not return to itself in the satisfaction of representation or consumption. In the case of Enjoyment, we cannot conceive affectivity as a faculty situated within the constellation of consciousness. The I is, rather, *supported* by affectivity and thus cannot be said to contain affection.”<sup>492</sup> Thus, affectivity precedes the subject and its ethical endeavors.

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<sup>490</sup> Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 111.

<sup>491</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 111.

<sup>492</sup> Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 113.

Indeed, “to enjoy is to be immersed in an ambiance of elements, to breath the air, to bathe in water and sun, to be established on the earth. Elements are not things, because they are too indeterminate for that, too formless, and too elusive.”<sup>493</sup> While still more specific than the sheer indeterminacy of being, the elements lack form or delineation, which makes them *both* interiority and exteriority. We convert the fruits of exteriority into interiority by consuming them for our sustenance. Indeed, “to hold on to exteriority is not simply equivalent to affirming the world, but is to posit oneself in it corporeally.”<sup>494</sup> As Wyschogrod points out, Levinas is wedging a gap between the category of sensation and representation, such that the former is possible without the latter.<sup>495</sup> Indeed, “against the traditional conception of the senses as the means through which we are able to know things, Levinas shows that the basic sensibility..... is a naive and spontaneous feeling at home in a world.”<sup>496</sup>

This joyous sensibility is troubled when we realize that the things that guarantee our enjoyment are not infinite. Furthermore, “our enjoyment is threatened therefore not only by the anonymous exteriority of the elemental, but.... by the personal exteriority of the face of the other.... it is enough that others appear as a subject, and not as an object of consumption, for my solitary enjoyment to collapse.”<sup>497</sup> As I encounter the suffering other amidst my enjoyment, I feel deep shame, as Levinas would have it, that comes from my recognition of the torment, weakness, and destitution of the other while I am enjoying myself.

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<sup>493</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 34.

<sup>494</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 127.

<sup>495</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, “Doing before Hearing: On the Primacy of Touch,” in *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. François Laruelle (Paris: Éditions Jean- Michel Place, 1980), 182.

<sup>496</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 38.

<sup>497</sup> Bernet, “The Traumatized Subject,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 172.

However, our enjoyment collapses even further during the times of meaningless toil and the scarcity of nourishment. During the time of the disaster and suffering, the world no longer presents itself as existing solely for the subject of enjoyment, the subject immersed in the fecundity of the sensible. As Levinas writes, “it is in times of misery and privation that the shadow of an ulterior finality which darkens the world is cast behind the object of desire.” He goes on to state, “when one has to eat, drink and warm oneself in order not to die, when nourishment becomes fuel, as in certain kinds of hard labor, the world also seems to be at an end, turned upside down and absurd, needing to be renewed. Time becomes unhinged.”<sup>498</sup> Thus, being exposed to the event of disaster signals that time is out of joint and unhinged, that the subject is no longer in step with the clock time of the world. I no longer recognize the world that has no place for me and whose flow of time is now unavailable to me, which also means the shadow of suffering, the broken time of the catastrophe. As Chanter helpfully points out, “this dislocated I, out of step with itself, worn out with the effort of trying to be itself, might anticipate the sense in which Levinas will speak of the restlessness of substitution.”<sup>499</sup>

Thus, moving from an altered time-sense brought about by an event of misery, where the otherwise carefree subject wishes for a reprieve from the temporality that equates suffering into the slowing down of the clock, to the rupture of the elemental, first by the worry about tomorrow and then by an encounter with the hungry other that initiates a new point of time for the subject. In this way, the fractured temporalities of the sufferer and the addressee finally come together. All these threads can be pulled into

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<sup>498</sup> Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, PDF pagination.

<sup>499</sup> Tina Chanter, “Ontological difference, sexual difference, and time” *Critical Assessments*, 110.

what Chanter calls ‘the otherness of time.’<sup>500</sup> Thus, describing the subject in the throes of insomnia and the subject of enjoyment ‘prepares’ the subject for hearing the call of the other or to be shell-shocked by suffering.

To recognize the other as suffering is to acknowledge that the mutilated sense of time plays a constitutive role in their torment. To go through suffering oneself is to know, sharply and viscerally, how it draws time into its orbit, making it an accomplice of evil, and it is to make it one’s task to abolish or at least fracture this agonizing temporality. I highlight this point because what is made possible here is not only the moral face-to-face relation or the jolt of suffering that comes from outside, that speaks in the voice of exteriority, but also a kind of sharing of broken temporalities, the coming together of the victim and the addressee, which is the moral relation Levinas set out to establish in the first place.<sup>501</sup> Rather than being characterized primarily as something inherently ineffable, now pain is expressed in the experience of time, the experience open to expression and analysis, which means that suffering can be shared and not in a mystical, sentimental, and usually vacuous way, but in a nuanced understanding of concrete structures of temporality. More importantly, to share the suffering of the other, by way of a broken temporality, is to solidify the moral bond between the two.

Under the reading I offered, we are moving away from the Levinasian view that ethics is possible only if we extract the otherness of the human from any worldly

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>501</sup> Speaking of the temporality of trauma, “what Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit*, or afterwardsness, seems to bring with it a sort of implosion of the ecstases of time—time lacks the strength to unfold, and as it thus becomes one-dimensional it is no longer an “element,” becoming flat and at the same time heavy...” Rudi Visker, *The Inhuman Condition: Looking for Difference After Levinas and Heidegger* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 100.



determinations and being itself. In so doing, I am attempting to undermine the Levinasian dichotomy, according to which you can either engage with concrete others in the world, yet remain in the realm of sameness, or you can encounter absolute otherness where being itself is on the brink of disappearance. Otherness, the way I read it, ushers in brute suffering and its grievous impact on its witness into the world, such that multiple embodied others are now inextricably linked to alterity through suffering, inhabiting a senseless realm ablaze with pain. Thus understood, the moral relation between the one in need of help and the addressee is being jolted by the suffering of a concrete other and refusing to accept their torment.

Now I would like to revisit and rearticulate even further key Levinasian ideas, i.e., my response to the suffering other, the role of the world and the senses, and the specificity and inescapability of my moral responsibility, from the Ophirian perspective on evil and its social production. What I hope to accomplish is to suggest a tentative approach to a new moral model, one utilizing the thinking of Ophir, Amery, and Levinas, or at least arrive at a set of theoretical tools for relating to concrete, embodied, suffering others in the world that we find ourselves in. In other words, my goal is, as it were, to put alterity to work in the very world where the socio-political production of evils is taking place.

Before doing so, it is important to point out two central problems in Levinas's thinking. The first one is that, in attempting to subsume every concrete under the figure of the absolute other, it becomes difficult to find our way back to concrete others embedded in the world. As Jackson writes, while "Levinas insists on the *immediate*, *materiality* of the ethical relation, but at the same time insists that the subject has this

immediate relation *to each and every other, equally, universally, without qualitative distinction.*” In other words, infinite responsibility to everyone leaves no tangible imprints in the world. As much as Levinas himself attempted to think the radically transcendent other and their predicament in its worldly, tangible specificity, the success of it is uncertain. Infinite responsibility is a concept without materiality and without the promise of efficacy, since it lacks a viable moral subject. As we recall, every *ought* must imply *can*. Jackson goes on to argue that, “keeping in mind Husserl’s analysis of the finite subject’s *necessary* embeddedness within *particular* social constellations, the question arises as to how one could possibly be ethically answerable to everyone.... except in abstraction.”<sup>502</sup> Which is to say, encountering suffering without the ability to differentiate and to judge is of little moral use, since it disallows evaluating the concrete circumstances of specific, embodied others and acting in the name of moral urgency.

In Bernasconi’s words, “Levinas gives no indication that my responsibility is in any way limited either by my objective condition or by that of the Other, who may be better off than I am.”<sup>503</sup> The problem here is the irreconcilable tension between the uniqueness of the absolute other and the many concrete others, waiting for their suffering to be recognized and alleviated by the potential addressees of their cries for help, the tension that cannot be resolved on the Levinasian terms alone. Indeed,

if I am taken hostage by *this* other, or *these* others, it necessarily follows that I cannot be responsible to *other* others. There would thus be no separated, enjoying ego, but rather a suffering subject who is constitutively burdened with contradictory responsibilities. Such conflicts would thus mark the necessity which

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<sup>502</sup> Jackson, “Persecution and social histories,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 275.

<sup>503</sup> Bernasconi, “*Only the Persecuted... Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed*,” Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 81.

binds the concrete subject, who suffers conflicts between, for example, a responsibility to country and a responsibility to the foreigner; a responsibility to the family and a responsibility to the poor; a responsibility to the mother and a responsibility to the father, etc.<sup>504</sup>

This is, in turn, related to Levinas's emphasis on the *infinity* of responsibility and the one-to-one relation he insists on. However, following my reading of pure otherness as an event of suffering and the idea that we encounter this otherness of distress in concrete others, we are no longer talking about the grandeur of one absolute other for whom there is no measure. We move from the personhood of suffering to suffering 'itself' if we are to maintain the specificity of victims and the distinction between victims, their socio-political condition, and non-victims. If *ought* is to be rooted in *can*, if obligation has to go hand in hand with viable agency for that obligation to ever be meaningful and have efficacy, relating to concrete others morally has to be, by necessity, both finite and feasible.

As Ophir reminds us,

evils take place between two types of possibilities: what could have been done to avoid their production or their distribution; what could have been done to ease the suffering or harm of the one who was injured by them or to annul the injury itself, through compensation or disengagement. One possibility is a desired state that will not be realized, a missed opportunity, a lost possibility buried in the past.... the other possibility is a desired state that has not yet been realized, an open future.<sup>505</sup>

Once we are confronted with the alterity of suffering, i.e., once we are jolted out of complacency and indifference, we must revisit the notion of evil as production. In other words, when the contagious affectivity of human suffering binds us to the predicament of

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 334.

others, when it fractures our time-sense, the next step is to study and analyze the conditions under which this suffering has been produced. Ophir goes on to say,

the denaturalization of evils has a crucial part in representing the possibilities of prevention, which in turn has a crucial part in the preventive action itself. In other words. the social ideology that represents the differential distribution of evils as natural, as God's will or the hand of fate, and as necessary and unpreventable, and the radical social critique that reconstructs the condition for the production and distribution of evils and exposes their contingency are among the factors that determine the modes and relations of producing and distributing evils.<sup>506</sup>

Thus, what is initially given to us affectively and viscerally must be situated in its social circumstances in accordance with the logic of the denaturalization of evils. Here affectivity and practice-oriented intelligibility must come together. While the affective event of suffering happens in disengagement from all relations, such that pain is flooding all our senses, the response to it must focus on embedding it into the particular socio-political circumstances and assessing one's situatedness and its potential for alleviating suffering. In other words, we must make a transition from the devastating immediacy of the shattering affectivity of agony to the study of the production of evils concretely and practically, like we study geology.<sup>507</sup>

The purity of the Levinasian responsibility, the responsibility instigated by one's encounter with absolute suffering, must be supplemented by de-naturalizing the production of this suffering and evaluating one's proximity to the suffering other, which requires a switch of registers. If Levinas's encounter with otherness takes place at the level of affectivity, that which bypasses and disengages from every relation, refusing to

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> The immediacy of suffering does not break down into what is natural and what is superfluous about this event. For instance, a person with disabilities can suffer from their physical predicament *and* lifelong abandonment by the world in crucially similar ways. Thus, the interiority of suffering knows no distinctions and it is up to the addressees to work out what is open to alleviation and de-naturalization and what is not.

be trapped in any form or phenomenon, the study of the production of this evil and the possibilities of its reduction must happen in the world in all of its concreteness and specificity. It must happen in the world of urgency-oriented thinking and judgment, the world of the socially astute *cogito* that assesses the possibilities of reducing suffering. The affectivity of otherness *qua* suffering has less to do with transcendence and much more with the *dimension* of being that refuses any categorization, knowledge, or mastery, as if undermining all our habitual certainties and the entire enterprise of seemingly self-sufficient subjectivity from within.

In other words, *I submit that suffering as a purely affective event does the same work in our world as the category of otherness in Levinas proper, yet this otherness has to be radically re-situated for it to acquire a true moral relevance.* It takes us out of sameness and binds us to concrete suffering others when we are confronted with the scandal of pure, meaningless suffering. Indeed, affects are often seen as an ‘intensity that emerges via the “in-between” spaces of singular encounters, signaling the potential to “become otherwise.”<sup>508</sup> Furthermore, “the term ‘affect’ describes the vital forces that influence our behaviour but which remain outside, or prior to, conscious awareness; affect is that which operates beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing.”<sup>509</sup> Thus, affects are unruly “tiny firefly intensities that flicker faintly in the night,”<sup>510</sup> swarming in the messy obscurity that lurks behind every rational *cogito*.<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Pedwell, Carolyn, and Anne Whitehead, “Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory.” *Feminist Theory* 13 (2): 2012, pp. 115-129.

<sup>509</sup> Elizabeth Stephens, “Bad Feelings,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 30, no. 85, pp. 273-282.

<sup>510</sup> Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shivers,” in *The Affect Reader*, 4.

<sup>511</sup> Affects run counter to theory or determination: subject/object, representation and meaning, rationality, consciousness, time and space, inside/outside, human/nonhuman,

While affects are *other than conscious knowing*, we should be reminded of Amery's affective reality and the idea that affectivity as such can also be used as a repository for inconvenient truths. Indeed, examining the affectivity of suffering led us to seeing the possibilities of disengagement from it, thus undermining the dichotomy between affect and intelligibility.

Let me return to the problem of transcendence for a moment. Indeed, while I believe that Levinas is Ophir's main interlocutor, he is adamant in his rejection of the Levinasian transcendence or, more precisely, the possibility of transcendence and the reduction of evils, as we see in the following passage cited in its entirety:

Transcendence is unfailingly finite, from one form of existence to another, from one system of relations to another, from a certain regularity of superfluous evils to another. Levinas might view the other possibility as exactly what is beyond being, or at least as what might lead us there or prepare us for it, or open us to it, or perhaps, and more precisely, he might argue that another possibility cannot be really different without presupposing and being open to that ultimate transcendence of an infinite other.<sup>512</sup>

For Levinas, we recall, the possibility of abolishing suffering is foreclosed in the world we live in because he reduces it to the domain of sameness, where alterity cannot appear at all and even a glimpse of it is swiftly subsumed under the relation of symmetry with others. As Badiou succinctly puts it, "Levinas maintains that metaphysics, imprisoned by its Greek origins, has subordinated thought to the logic of the Same, to the primacy of substance and identity, but.... it is impossible to arrive at an authentic thought of the

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identity, structure, background/foreground, and so forth-become decidedly less sure and more nonsequential (any notion of strict "determination" or directly linear cause and effect goes out the window too). Because affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units, it makes easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs." Ibid.

<sup>512</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 438.

Other (and thus an ethics of the relation to the Other) from the despotism of the Same, which is incapable of recognizing this Other.”<sup>513</sup> Thus, simply put, Levinas insists on the dichotomy between the world *qua* foreclosure of any singularity and the transcendence *qua* the possibility of genuine morality. Ophir goes on to say,

I wish to insist that the other possibility is completely down-to-earth, sometimes trivial, sometimes heroic, sometimes self-evident, sometimes clarified only after a long journey of the critical mind. The other possibility is that of sabotaging the serialization of the production of this particular “line” of superfluous evils, of interrupting the repetition, stopping the machine that reproduces Evil. Moral theory should teach how to cut the fine cords of the serial repetition that Evil is made of. It should also teach that only some, if any, are ever cut, and always at the risk that new ones may appear in their place, that is, without waiting for a Messiah and without hoping for salvation.<sup>514</sup>

Thus, Levinas construes the world as the totality of sameness and the source of the self’s enjoyment, where human singularity has no chance of making itself known. However, Ophir’s possibility of the reduction of evils in their superfluous being already introduces a rupture in this totality, which means that evils can be addressed morally without introducing transcendence as an unhinging of ontology. Indeed, “it is not Being as such, either its (imagined) totality or its (impossible) closure, that should be equated with Evil, but only the superfluity in Being.”<sup>515</sup> The differentiation of being into multiple modalities allows Ophir to salvage the category of being from the Levinasian accusations without compromising his assertion that evil has a being of its own. Following this logic, the world cannot be the selfsame, static totality of beings if a particular modality of being and the totality of evils in the world are open to oscillation, i.e., increase or decrease. Indeed, the world is home both to the passions of joy and the passions of sorrow, to moral

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<sup>513</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay On The Understanding Of Evil* (London: Verso, 2012), 5.

<sup>514</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 438.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*

heroism and indifference, to the erasure of singularity and an encounter with a specific human being. Furthermore, I believe that encountering a human being as a unique individual is not a possibility that is so remote that we must painstakingly look for ways to ease the grip of being in order to bring it about. We encounter individuality every day.<sup>516</sup> As Didion hauntingly writes, following the death of her husband and the life-threatening illness of her beloved daughter,

I am a writer. Imagining what someone would say or do comes to me as naturally as breathing. Yet on each occasion these pleas for his presence served only to reinforce my awareness of the final silence that separated us. Any answer he gave could exist only in my imagination, my edit. For me to imagine what he could say only in my edit would seem obscene, a violation. I could no more know what he would say about UCLA and the trach than I could know whether he meant to leave the “to” out of the sentence about J.J. McClure and Teresa Kean and the tornado. We imagined we knew everything the other thought, even when we did not necessarily want to know it, but in fact, I have come to see, we knew not the smallest fraction of what there was to know.<sup>517</sup>

We encounter a singular human being in our ordinary life because, as we ultimately and harrowingly find out one way or another, we do not know even the tiniest fraction of what there is to know. I submit that we do not need a catastrophe to disclose to us the singularity of someone we know, since there is nothing preventing us from recognizing that in the first place.

However, I want to amplify the problematization of transcendence and extra-worldly otherness even furthermore, by elucidating their key features. More precisely, *I will continue arguing that Levinas’s emphasis on the other in intolerable distress allows us to catch a glimpse into the ‘who’ of suffering, the other that haunts and persecutes me, not the ‘how,’ i.e., not the way in which human suffering presents itself, which is*

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<sup>516</sup> This is an important part of Badiou’s critique of the concept of radical alterity. Badiou, *Ethics*, 17.

<sup>517</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 127.



*fundamentally meaningless and superfluous*. The task is thus not to conjoin human singularity and the scandal of suffering, but to strip suffering of its guise of necessity. While many thinkers have understandably equated death with the ultimate limit of human existence, Levinas equates suffering with this radical absurdity and the ‘other than’ of being.

As we recall, the famous Heideggerian being-toward-death, which is an absolute lucidity insofar as I catch a glimpse of the horizon of finitude and its possibilities that are inescapably mine. This becomes my vantage that allows me to take up my possibilities *as a finite being*, which, in turn, means that being toward death singularizes and individualizes.<sup>518</sup> It is the human being’s source of freedom and the absolute otherness, for there is nothing more other than nothingness. In other words, encountering the otherness of being, understood as death, paradoxically heightens and sharpens my sense of being and the fact that it is irredeemably mine. However, according to Levinas, it is not death, but suffering that constitutes absolute otherness. Levinas claims that suffering is not merely a restriction of one’s freedom, constricting possible spontaneous movements, but an overwhelming of one’s humanity. This overwhelming, i.e., suffering, is evil, unbearable, and absurd precisely because it is fundamentally useless and without justifications. He further writes, “death in Heidegger is an event of freedom, whereas for me the subject seems to reach the limit of the possible in suffering. It finds itself enchained, overwhelmed, and in some way passive.”<sup>519</sup> Suffering or pain is precisely what strips us of our agency and crucifies us on the imperative to it. Indeed, “all evil relates back to suffering,” Levinas asserts powerfully and succinctly, in the sense that both are

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<sup>518</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 294, 307.

<sup>519</sup> Levinas, “Time and the Other,” 71.

fundamentally *useless*. “It is the impasse of life and of being,” he goes on to say, “in which pain does not just somehow innocently happen to *color* consciousness with affectivity. The evil of pain, the deleterious per se, is the outburst and deepest expression, so to speak, of absurdity.”<sup>520</sup>

Suffering is thus not an added affectivity, but affectivity that ought not to be, affectivity as a scandal. Its irremediable meaningless surges against all possible signification and undoes the world for the sufferer.<sup>521</sup> Thus, suffering, understood as the fundamental absence of meaning, is indeed what breaks the immanence of subjectivity.<sup>522</sup> As I understand it, while Levinas equates being as such with evil,<sup>523</sup> he neglects to consider that the very *superfluity* of suffering and its mode of being ‘for nothing,’ and its true scandal, is only one modality of being and that the modality in question is *produced and socially distributed*.<sup>524</sup> In other words, Levinas’s critique of ontology, the way he understands it, seems to preclude the study of socio-political circumstances surrounding each event of suffering. However, while Levinas does not consider the possibility that

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<sup>520</sup> Ibid., “Useless Suffering,” *Entre-Nous*, 98

<sup>521</sup> See Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 37.

<sup>522</sup> It is worth noting that, given the primacy of ethics, my singular death does not have the last word here. As Levinas puts it, “at the origin of death, reveals a cruel world, but one to the scale of human relations. The will... exposed to death but not immediately, has time to be for the Other, and thus to recover meaning despite death. This existence for the Other, this Desire of the other, this goodness liberated from the egoist gravitation, retains a personal character... The Desire into which the threatened will dissolves no longer defends the powers of a will, but, as the goodness whose meaning death cannot efface, has its center outside of itself.” Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 236.

<sup>523</sup> Cf. Levinas, “Being is essentially alien and strikes against us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us. There is a pain in Being,” *Existence and Existents*, PDF pagination.

<sup>524</sup> For an illuminating discussion of Levinas’s reworking of the question of being vis-à-vis Heidegger’s ontological difference, see Jean-Luc Marion, “A Note Concerning the Ontological Indifference,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 20.2-21.1 (1998): pp. 25-40, especially 26.

being can very well be *human-made*, which makes all the difference for Ophir and the present moral inquiry, his account of suffering as the otherness of all human signification, human endeavors, and life itself is indispensable to us.

### Excursus

Allow me to say a few more words about the Levinasian transcendence. As Bernasconi elucidates, “my desire to escape myself arises from my identity with myself, that is to say, from the impossibility of my escaping from myself.” He goes on to say, “this experience of being reduced to an identity, an identity that is nevertheless marked by a refusal to be reduced to itself because it is inherently not at home in the world, not only marked Levinas’ sense of his own social identity, it also led him to challenge traditional philosophical conceptions of identity and so rethink identity in general.”<sup>525</sup> Thus, what Bernasconi is telling us is that the Levinasian concern with transcendence arose out of the experience of being chained to oneself, most pronounced in suffering. He began searching for “the point where there is a shattering of the enchainment of matter.”<sup>526</sup> However, Levinas was not looking for transcendence or rupture enfolded in immanence. His goal was to find “an exit from Being while at the same time retaining a foothold in Being.”<sup>527</sup> I understand this as saying that his concern was not to discover transcendence within immanence, but to approach the latter from the standpoint of the former, infecting immanence with something radically other than it. He asks, “How, in

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<sup>525</sup> Bernasconi, “No Exit: Levinas’ Aporetic Account Of Transcendence,” *Research in Phenomenology*, Volume 35, Issue 1, pp. 101-117.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

the alterity of a you, can I remain I, without being absorbed or losing myself in that you?”<sup>528</sup> That is, “How can the ego become other to itself?”<sup>529</sup>

While the explication of Levinas’s admittedly complex and controversial answer, falling along the lines of gender, such as fecundity, the feminine, the paternal, goes far beyond the scope of this work, I want to suggest that the ego is radically transformed in an encounter with suffering, here and now, in this world. In an exposure to suffering, the ego becomes other to itself by obsessively taking on the predicament of the other, exemplified by such remarks as “I just can’t stop thinking about what happened to her.” However, it is not the shards of transcendence that introduce exteriority into the stifling interiority of the self, that make the self foreign to itself, but the shards of the superfluous evil that should have been abolished, but was not. We have no need for transcendence, *if we understand the superfluity of evil as exteriority*, as what touches us with torment, yet can never be internalized.

What remains to be noted is that Levinas is completely right to place alterity at the center of his moral reflections. He is right to yoke together genuine morality and otherness, as long as we resist understanding the otherness in question as the human form of the Kantian law that summons us from above to act morally<sup>530</sup> or the idea that to experience human uniqueness is to become captive to the other’s ethical demands. The otherness of suffering is not the royal road to an over-saturation of human uniqueness, which then turns out to have the force to draw us into its moral orbit and to comport

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<sup>528</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 90.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Levinas submits that “the human is defined by the recognition of a moral vocation.” For a fruitful juxtaposition of the philosophies of Kant and Levinas, see Chalier, *What Ought I To Do?* 85.

ourselves ethically. It is, rather, the royal road to de-naturalizing suffering by presenting it in its superfluity and in its potential to make us dead even before our biological death.<sup>531</sup>

I therefore further submit that it is not about the hounded individuality that fails to break through the suffocating grid of equivalences and exchanges snapped on the complexity and recalcitrant singularities of the world. It is about the otherness of suffering, the otherness so eminently powerful and so alien to everything human that sometimes it renders death itself trivial. Put otherwise, alterity is no longer seen as a moral container of human singularity. Rather, alterity is how suffering presents itself to us, where ‘presents’ means ‘shreds’ and ‘devours.’

What confers centrality to the otherness of suffering is its work and its well-kept secrets: it hides under the guise of necessity and nature, justifications and theodicies, it dupes us into believing it has the potential for becoming meaningful, for being *for the sake of something*, it pretends to be ineffable, such that you are trapped in isolation,<sup>532</sup> and it mutilates our sense of time. It initiates us into the senselessness that undoes us and the world we used to inhabit, and it chains us to the duration of the unbearable, while making us think that a passion-laden temporality is a psychological aberration. We choose to hold on to the otherness of suffering in order to give an expression to its true

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<sup>531</sup> “In principle a brain injury, a natural catastrophe, a brutal, sudden, blind event cannot be reintegrated retrospectively into experience. These types of events are pure hits, tearing and piercing subjective continuity and allowing no justification or recall in the psyche. How do you internalize a cerebral lesion? How do you speak about emotional deficit since words must be carried by the affects whose very absence is precisely what is in question here?” Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident*, 31.

<sup>532</sup> See Phil Klay, “After War, a Failure of the Imagination,” accessed on 07/15/2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/opinion/sunday/after-war-a-failure-of-the-imagination.html?hp&rref=opinion&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/opinion/sunday/after-war-a-failure-of-the-imagination.html?hp&rref=opinion&_r=0)

nature, to study its exteriority *qua* superfluity, and to exile it, however partially and locally, from being.

If what I have outlined above allows us to bring together Levinas's insights into the absolute otherness of suffering and the finite responsibility for it and social production of evil *qua* meaninglessness and distress, which I believe it does, we are now in a position to reevaluate another central theme of his thought, which is sacrifice unto death for the sake of the other, which is something he unexpectedly shares with Ophir. In other words, I want to re-situate this sacrificial orientation in light absolute otherness understood as superfluous socially produced suffering. No longer will we be looking up high to discern the source of genuine ethics and the traces of otherness. Rather, we will be holding on to the equation of suffering with social production, remaining worldly, finite, rooted in the web of familiarities and differences.

Let us return to the Levinasian questions of responsibility and substitution. According to Levinas, there is no measure to what the subject can give to the other and there is no holding back. In substitution, the subject exists solely for the other, divested of its freedom and will. In the infinite demand of the destitute other, i.e., naked suffering, I am summoned to give everything I have, e.g., to offer the loaf of bread when I am starving, to take off my coat when I am freezing, to walk that extra mile, which is another way of saying that the subject is summoned to sacrifice, possibly unto death. It is a paradoxical sacrifice that is neither chosen nor willed, for, as Levinas says, "the sacrifice of a hostage designated who has not chosen himself to be hostage, but possibly elected by the Good, in an involuntary election not assumed by the elected one."<sup>533</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>533</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 15.

this is not an act done by the same for the sake of the other, insofar as the self had already been shattered and substituted for the suffering other. The sameness and security of the self have already been undone. The experience of sacrifice does not stem from a free choice, but rather from “the impossibility of evading the neighbor’s call,”<sup>534</sup> from a kind of primordial affectivity deep within us. The way I would like to interpret it, once again contra Levinas, is that once the very tissue of my being becomes intolerable, absurd suffering, thus affectively and morally binding me to the other I am facing, there is indeed no possibility of disengaging from it. This is the sense I am giving to Levinas’s claim that the other’s cry for help cannot be evaded. No matter what we do next, brute suffering *touches* us.<sup>535</sup> Of course, encountering suffering in our daily life often does fail to incite an interest, let alone the feeling of revolt in the addressee. This is due to, at least in part, to the *occlusion* of the event of suffering, i.e., the fact that it is too obscured by the veil of justifications for the addressee to be truly affected by it. While Levinas would say that it is obscured by the reign of sameness or a failure of individuality, Ophir would attribute this lack of moral interest to habituation and the pretense of justification (‘This is all for the greater good’) and necessity. Whatever the case may be, the point here is that sacrifice without any measure, i.e., unto death, is seen as the pinnacle of measureless moral giving. To insist on preserving some degree of measure is, according to both thinkers, to taint one’s moral endeavors.

However, I want to problematize a theory that celebrates sacrifice unto death, even when what is at stake is a moral response to suffering. Even though it is undeniably

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid., “Substitution,” *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 95.

<sup>535</sup> It is no accident that Ophir sees indifference as the antithesis of moral sensibility, not cruelty or sadism. Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 74.

true that the “I for you,” the giving up of my self-interest for the sake of the other, is the precondition for any morality, the “I for you” can take many forms, such that giving unto death is not the only or even the preferred one.<sup>536</sup> Going back to the experience of the victim and my reading of Amery’s haunting testimony, we can say that their predicament is such that their only reality, the reality flooding all their senses, is suffering. It is the resentment that the world is indifferent to your misery, the loneliness that no one seems to be able or even willing to lift, the senses that no longer know joy. It is inhabiting the time that is mutilated and broken. It is the subjective world as a closed totality, the unbreakable totality of suffering, for there is no escape from yourself and you are always coming back to your agony. We are told that “the more the injury suffered mutates into a sense of permanency.... the less likely any practical transformation of the situation becomes.”<sup>537</sup>

In other words, ongoing suffering creates a suffocating and deadly sense of permanence and closure in the victim.<sup>538</sup> The longer their suffering goes on, unbroken by even a moment of joy, the more their life-trajectory is organized by it and by it alone. In the darkness of senselessness and injustice, “all smiles have become archaic,”<sup>539</sup> as we are told in Le Guin’s magnificent short story. Similarly, in Fanon’s words, “the

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<sup>536</sup> Another practical issue with sacrifice is that those who are already prone to sacrifice (e.g., the disabled and other groups seen as ‘inferior,’ feeling the need to make up for their very existence) will cross the limit readily and fall prey to possibly irrevocable self-harm. However, those without a socially construed sacrificial drive will not get close to it. Either way, in emphasizing sacrifice, we will not get more people “on board” for the purposes of rendering ethical responses more common and consistent.

<sup>537</sup> Minkinen, “*Ressentiment as Suffering*,” *Law & Literature*, 521.

<sup>538</sup> See also Henry Krystal, “Trauma and Aging: A Thirty-Year Follow-Up,” *Trauma*.

<sup>539</sup> Ursula Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters: Short Stories*, accessed on 09/07/2017, <https://www.utilitarianism.com/nu/omelas.pdf>



mutilation that they have suffered affected the very movement of their lives, the rhythm of their existence....”<sup>540</sup> With this in mind, sacrificing yourself unto death, even if it is to diminish the suffering of the other, means ultimately reaffirming the totality of suffering *qua* tormenting absurdity for the victim. One’s sacrificial death, no matter how noble it is, reaffirms and amplifies the victim’s sense that there is no possibility of meaning or refuge. Death does not dissipate the darkness inhabited by the sufferer. To affirm sacrifice unto death is thus, I submit, to abandon the victim in their vicious circle of torment. It is, in short, to cause more suffering for the one who is already in pain. To be sure, some sacrifices are understandable and indeed morally necessary, e.g., we can easily imagine a mother trying to save his child from a burning house. The sacrifices do happen, there is no question about that, but they should not be upheld as a moral duty or principle. Once again, what I want to highlight here is while sacrifices may indeed be exceedingly admirable, sacrificial thinking, tacitly and possibly against itself, smuggles back the affirmation of ultimate senselessness, which is precisely what we take up as our guiding moral issue to begin with.

Furthermore, once we reinterpret the height and infinity of otherness as an event of human suffering, the suffering that always coincides with singular human beings and their specific worldly circumstances, it is not the questionable gift of death that the victim needs. Recalling Amery, to do justice and to honor his tormenting resentments is precisely *to live in taking up radical agency, to live in accordance with the possibility of acting otherwise in the face of suffering*. What has the chance of minimizing suffering is not noble death, but *relating to it from the standpoint of radical agency and moral*

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<sup>540</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, tr. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 42.

*urgency*. The victim needs to rejoin the common world,<sup>541</sup> to rejoin their fellow human beings, which is the exact opposite of what Lingis aptly calls ‘deathbound subjectivity’ and its sacrificial thinking. To give morally, without measure, is to resist indifference, vigilantly and continuously. It is to create a different, *moral* duration of living in the world alongside the victims. It takes only a split second to die. It takes a lifetime to stand by someone, without dismissing their suffering and without shrouding it in necessity and ineffability.

In other words, the new moral heroism stemming from the view of evil as production and the present as the domain where evils can still be reduced is resisting any and all temptation of justification or meaning that erases the scandal of suffering. Of course, I can know that a possibility may rise where I am summoned to make the hard choices and in fact give up my own life for the sake of ending the other’s suffering. Yet, there is no compelling reason to conflate the awareness of this possibility with the ideal of sacrifice unto death. To give without measure is to *live for and alongside someone in torment*.

Lastly, I would like to lead us, however tentatively, from the abolition of a concrete event of suffering, which is both our fundamental and humble imperative, to reclaiming the world for the singular others. This is a departure from Ophir who asserted his lack of concern with good or even happiness, for the sake of suggesting a *less negative utilitarianism*, with the aim of reducing evils. In all of our expositions of suffering, we have seen it as assaulting the senses through the relentlessness of its duration, turning the human body into the source of prolonged torture, and mutilating

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<sup>541</sup> See Arendt on the world of appearances where one becomes *who* one is. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998).

one's sense of time, such that the victim is chained to the selfsame present of torment. Yet, how is this possible vis-à-vis Ophir's refusal to go beyond the elimination of evils, Amery's rejection of healing, and Levinas's suffering other?

We saw the co-mingling of broken temporalities in the Levinasian encounter with the suffering other. These temporalities are suffused with the passions of persecution, haunting, traumatism, and obsession. However, the scene of sharing under discussion is confined, as Levinas insists, to two people, the sufferer and the addressee. Going all the way back to Spinoza, we recall his 'intricate relationality' and fluctuations of passions, bodies, ideas, intensities, and durations, which, I believe, translates into the affective time we *all* share. To reiterate, the Spinozist time is given to us as a bodily impact of nearly infinite affective durations. In step with my efforts to disabuse us of the idea that suffering is ineffable, we can say that all of us know, viscerally and experientially, the texture of a joyful duration and the unbearable slowing down of time at the heart of suffering. These are the affective chunks of lived knowledge we all have, shaped and molded by time. Now, imagine someone who has experienced the senselessness and the evil of pain, but only briefly and half-mercifully. After all, "anybody can search his memories for the emotion which proved the most devastating or for the cruelest blow of fate."<sup>542</sup> That someone can reflect on and 'vary' their experience of pain, such that they think, "This was *my* experience, fortunately cut short. But what if I knead this affective chunk of knowledge like clay, pulling and stretching it, until I can imagine a suffering other whose very days are darkened by this unbearable presence of pain, going on, and

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<sup>542</sup> Gerard de Nerval, "Aurélia or Dream and Life," *Selected Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 266.

on, and on, and on.”<sup>543</sup> This variation, I argue, bears a strong resemblance to moral understanding, animated by the teleological desire to reduce an other’s suffering and equipped with the well-defined practices of alleviation. As Lispector puts it, elegantly and powerfully, “I found a knowing sensibility much more important when it comes to living with others and trying to understand them... I daresay this kind of sensibility, which is capable of stirring emotions and making one think even without using the mind, is a gift. A gift which can be diminished with neglect or perfected if exercised to the full.”<sup>544</sup>

While Levinas speaks of the multiple experiences that overwhelm us, undermining the primacy of the *cogito* and initiating us into radical passivity, the absolute other being the epitome of such, as Bernet argues,<sup>545</sup> traumatic events, the moral understanding, made out of durational chunks, I am articulating invites a more active comportment, judgment, and imagination. This is no longer strictly between the suffering other and the addressee, but it also draws other potential addressees into its orbit, once

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<sup>543</sup> In phenomenology, we perform eidetic variation when we begin from a phenomenon as we know it, from an appearance, but we do not then amass its various empirical instantiations in order to say something theoretically illuminative about it. If all we do is collect empirical scenarios, everything about our inquiry can be negated if we come across a scenario that contradicts what we have gathered so far. The aim of such inquiry is rather to produce an a priori description of any given phenomenon, such that it can be informed by the changes in this phenomenon and not simply negated by them. Said otherwise, the imaginative variation we use to distill the necessary elements of a phenomenon synthesizes the empirical data, but is, in important ways, detached from it. We can vary the notion of table far and wide, until we imagine something that is no longer recognizable as a table and the phenomenon collapses. This is similar to what I mean by an experiential variation. “What holds up amid such free variations of an original [...] as the invariant, the necessary, universal form, the essential form, without which something of that kind [...] would be altogether inconceivable?” Husserl, *Phenomenological Psychology: Lectures, Summer Semester, 1925* (Berlin: Springer, 1977), 54.

<sup>544</sup> Lispector, “A Knowing Sensibility,” *Selected Cronicas*, Kindle ed.

<sup>545</sup> Bernet, “The Traumatized Subject,” *Research in Phenomenology*, pp. 160-179.

the efficacy of the moral practices in question has been made visible and the possibility of a different kind of understanding, both visceral, cognitive, and imaginal, has been laid bare.

In other words, to go beyond the negative utilitarianism of Ophir, it is to inhabit the world *continuously* in such a way that does justice to the experience of the victim. It is to act otherwise in the face of suffering, exercising our agency such that ‘the next’ victim, in the throes of suffering, experiences others as *morally present for them*. It is to include them in the world not formally, but in an active, singular sense, where we gain a degree understanding of the suffering of concrete others by disassembling our own experiences of various affective durations into bits of lived knowledge that we can cultivate into the practice of compassionate variation, leading to moral understanding. As suggested a moment ago, this type of knowledge or understanding is both lived and visceral, forever incomplete, inseparable from and animated by the innumerable intensities swarming around and right inside human bodies.

Here I am using passional time as an epistemic tool, albeit laden with vibrancy and transience. I do *not* wish to say that once we understand each other’s experiences better, we will become a true community. What this epistemic tool does for us is that it eliminates the excuse of lack of understanding and enhances the practices of those who are already interested in the well-being of others. It does not take the love of every suffering other you encounter. It takes only an interest.

Let us note that, contra Freud, I am *not* arguing that the inassimilable grain of trauma keeps haunting the sufferer continues to survive ‘alongside’ or ‘beneath’ conscious thinking because it, by definition, overwhelms and disables our cognitive and

psychic structures. For Freud, for something to be traumatic is to elude consciousness. What I *am* arguing is that the afterlife of an event of suffering varies in important ways from one person to the next based on the world's recognition of and response to their suffering, on their access to support channels, like medical care and legal representation, not to mention a network of friends, and on their experience of the others and their agency when the chips are down.

Let me provide a concrete example here. The disabled living in Russia are essentially imprisoned in their apartments, should they be lucky to have a roof over their heads at all, since the latter routinely lack ramps and elevators. Again, what this means is being confined to your tiny room for the rest of your life, should you be unfortunate enough to be disabled. Indeed,

in Sochi, "Maria" (not her real name), a 26-year-old woman who uses a wheelchair, spends months confined to her third-floor municipal apartment because her building lacks an accessible ramp and functioning elevator. She crawls from room to room because the corridors in her apartment are too narrow for her wheelchair. Since 2000, Maria has written to the local administration officials requesting an accessible apartment as mandated by her state medical documents. The authorities responded that no such housing is available.<sup>546</sup>

The experiences of the Russian disabled writer Ruben Gallego, whose memoir about his childhood in Soviet orphanages won the prestigious Russian Booker Prize and has been translated into several languages are even more harrowing,

Gallego wished he had been born in America, where (he had been told) the disabled were simply put down. (Later he visited the country and was deeply impressed with McDonald's.) There was euthanasia of a sort practised on disabled Russian children. If after 10 years of education they hadn't learned to make a

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<sup>546</sup> Andrea Mazzarino, "Russia: End Hurdles for People With Disabilities," *Human Rights Watch*, accessed on 09/07/2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/23/russias-hurdles-people-disabilities>

living, hardly likely for those who couldn't walk, they would be transferred to an old people's home, where they would be unlikely to last more than weeks.<sup>547</sup>

Here Gallego is clearly telling us that there are types of suffering worse than death. His own book opens with the following line, unparalleled in its bleak intensity: "I'm a hero. It's easy to be a hero. If you don't have hands or feet, you're either a hero or dead."<sup>548</sup> The disabled in Russia and multiple other, often ostensibly civilized countries, are deprived of access to the shared world and, as such, our pain, the pain stemming both from our often painful medical conditions and from the reign of indifference around us, remains hidden.<sup>549</sup> We cannot take a stroll down the street or enjoy the sunshine in a leafy park.<sup>550</sup> Everything that the shared world has to offer is denied to us thoroughly and with a chilling finality. Here we also begin to see that the Levinasian subject arising out of worldly enjoyment is closer to being a privilege than a universal condition. To reduce someone's suffering is a *negative, yet necessary* goal and to usher the victim back into the light of the world where suffering is given to comprehension through our bits of affective time is a *constructive, positive* one, as if the two were the sides of the same coin. Conversely, depriving someone of participating in the common world must be seen as an evil that ought to be abolished.

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<sup>547</sup> Mars-Jones, Adam. "White on Black by Ruben Gallego: From victim to hero," *The Guardian*, 2006, accessed on 05/17/2017,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/29/biography.features2>.

<sup>548</sup> Ruben Gallego, *White on Black* (Fort Washington: Harvest Books, 2007), 2.

<sup>549</sup> See Siebers for his notion of 'the new realism of the body,' where the pain that often accompanies multiple disabling conditions is not swiftly converted into a hidden advantage or whisked away by a theoretical sleight of hand. Siebers, *Disability Theory*, pp. 53-70.

<sup>550</sup> Cf. Sara Ahmed on queerness, comfort, and discomfort in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 147-48.

Thus, going beyond Ophir means emphasizing the flipside of minimizing suffering, which is to be flooded with the world. This is the world where suffering is never completely abolished, just like my own illness will always remain incurable and painful, but recognized and fragmented, time and again, once it arises and endures. This is the world where the affective reality of the victims is recognized and honored when others assume the kind of radical agency that the sufferers expect of them. This is the world where the sufferers and others are bound to each other through affective temporality, since most of us have experienced pain, however trivial and brief. Only a failure of imagination can stop us from sensing what it must be like for the sufferer when their pain is prolonged and unmitigated.

This is the not world without suffering, but rather the world without indifference. To be sure, this *is* an ideal state of affairs. However, I submit that scrutinizing the specific conditions that produce evils, i.e., refusing to be duped by the mask of necessity, reinstating the idea of urgency as the only way to respond morally to the suffering one who cannot wait, and doing justice to the affective reality of the victim by taking up my freedom are the resources that are required to even begin to make this state of affairs a reality.

Radical agency is not about grandiosity or the utilitarian ideal of responding to the suffering of the greatest amount of people.<sup>551</sup> It is about recognizing that the victims do not suffer the same and about helping one singular individual, the one whose social circumstances are such that the other in question, in his or her suffering, cannot wait. It is about admitting and letting this admission inflect our moral thinking that we cannot help

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<sup>551</sup> Cf. the celebrated utilitarian theorist Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).



everyone, due to the obvious limitations of finite human beings, even if the suffering around us is so overwhelming that it often becomes paralyzing. We form our judgment and decide to offer relief to an other in the greatest not only because they are likely facing the irremediable, but also because the feeling of being fully abandoned when the possibility of relief *was* present will keep preying on the victim's mind and life itself for many years to come.

It is about admitting that while we cannot help everyone, we are capable of discerning those few who, in their suffering, are still abandoned and cut off from any support channels and we are capable of responding to their predicament, even if it means doing something seemingly minor so as to work even a tiny fissure into the monolithic duration of their torment. It is about keeping in mind that even something as seemingly minor as taking someone in grief for a walk on a summer day injects something new into their time-sense of unbearable duration. This morality is not likely to find any reward or even recognition, at least not any time soon, since we are still very far from seeing the truths hidden in the affects of the victims, moving away from the utilitarian value placed on helping the greatest possible number of people at the expense of the weaker one, and taking up our freedom in the face of suffering. Indeed, we are far from hearing the victims who are telling us that what hurts the most is not even brute physical pain or a terrible loss. *What truly hurts and undoes the suffering others is the other's the indifference to their predicament, i.e., the refusal to admit that one can act otherwise. The moral truth of suffering at its harrowing, gnawing worst, with its socially produced circumstances alongside indifference and neglect.*

To conclude with, let me sum up the lessons on temporality we have learned from each thinker under consideration here, in order to highlight the transition from biological time to the normativity of a different kind of temporality, since the latter has been one of the main organizing threads of the present project. We began with Spinoza and his argument that time is an illusion and that the perfect intellect can see it for what it is. I then turn to the question of passions or affects, which have nothing illusory about them if we consider their fully real impact on us and which play a key role in human well-being or malaise. While biological time may be lacking in reality, a sense of time is given to us through passions, a sense of time that is both fully real and visceral, experienced, felt. The time-sense in question wanes and waxes with the materiality of our body and it pulsates in and through us, reaching a kind of crescendo when we are happy and slowing down to a cruel still when we suffer. This is the origin of what I have been calling affective temporality.

With Ophir, we draw an important distinction between the catastrophes of the past and the catastrophes of the present, no matter what their monstrosity is, since the former can no longer be halted and the latter still can. We ‘turn toward the disaster’ insofar as it is still happening or about to happen, for our central goal is the reduction of socially produced evils in the world. This attention to the evils that are still open to reduction, i.e., have enough ontological fluidity to go either in the direction of increase or decrease, is closely aligned with the notion of moral urgency. If a lot of forms of evils are man-made, it is the present where we learn to unmake them. As such, we reclaim the domain of the present as the site where evils can either *decrease* or *increase* from the reign of universal

time, where the past, the present, and the future are certainly experientially unique, yet never truly seen as complicit in the production of evils or their amelioration.

Amery, in turn, postulates the existence of moral time of the victim. More precisely, he turns us toward the possibility of agency and its time. His normative time is the refusal to accept the thought that human beings are exempt from agency, understood as the freedom to make one's own judgments, choices, and decisions in the face of suffering. His moral time is the duration of the refusal to accept that the overwhelming indifference of others he experienced as a victim signals the impossibility of acting otherwise, which is a revolt against facts and against the time of the world that tells the victim that even if the addressees of their suffering *could* have responded otherwise, it no longer truly matters. In accordance with biological time, the way someone may or may not have acted in the past, barring punishable crimes, is of little relevance, since the arrow of universal human life-time flies forward, inexorably increasing the distance between the actions in question and the present. However, moral time does not care about this distance, thus making visible the idea that the over-saturation of resentful temporality is the over-saturation of inaction in the face of suffering, suspending the victim between their initial form of distress (an act of violence, disability, wartime conditions, grief, and so on) and the degree of indifference to it, experienced during and after the event. The refusal of the promise of healing made by the natural time is the refusal of the well-meaning wisdom that 'We all make mistakes, some worse than others, but we're all the same really.'<sup>552</sup> Amery's normative temporality submits that *we are not all morally the*

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<sup>552</sup> Perhaps Arendt had something similar in mind when she mused that forgiveness is the only way to genuinely free someone from the crushing weight of their past misdeeds. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 65.

*same and clock-time should not blind us to this fact or exempt us from the task of judgment.*<sup>553</sup> Put otherwise, Amery turns us toward the possibility of agency and its time. His normative time is the refusal to accept the claim that human beings are exempt from agency.

Finally, Levinas places radical alterity and the broken time of suffering at the heart of his moral inquiry. Re-articulating radical alterity as a life-negating event of suffering deepens our analysis of the ways in which suffering runs counter to all human endeavors, further presenting it as the realm where the senselessness of evil is at its most visible. To give up on alleviating suffering and all the harm it does to human corporeality is to give up on responding to the problem of evil altogether.<sup>554</sup> The otherness of time signals one's violent distancing from the world brought up by suffering. In other words, a mutilated time-sense alerts us to the fact that, in suffering, someone's world is dying, that they are no longer experiencing the world as a site of belonging. Crucially, given Levinas's unwavering insistence on the face-to-face relation, i.e., an encounter with a suffering other, both the victim and the addressee, the way I read it, begin to inhabit and share 'time out of joint.' While the time-sense of the sufferer and the time-sense of the addressee undoubtedly have important differences, both are now initiated into a kind of unhinged temporality of the disaster.

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<sup>553</sup> "Indifference to the suffering of sentient beings would demarcate the moral domain from the outside, in the same way that indifference to error, deception, and illusion demarcates the limits of science, and indifference to appearances marks the limits of the visual arts." Ophir, "Disaster as a Place of Morality," *Qui Parle*, Vol. 16, No.1 Summer 2006, pp. 95-96.

<sup>554</sup> For Ophir, the *raison d'être* of morality is "the ongoing presence of others in distress, their unbearable suffering and humiliation, and the obligation to reduce their mal-being," *ibid.*, 95.

By arguing for the shareable, even contagious nature of a broken time-sense and Spinoza's affective durations we all inhabit by defining suffering as the impossibility of all refuge, i.e., a kind of terrible duration, both thinkers offer us a language of suffering, turning it into something we can understand and discuss, however inadequately. Whether we speak of the duration that never quite seems to end or of the clock slowing down, the phenomenon of altered time can be discussed, broken down, and studied. What is at stake here is discerning the structural and experiential dimensions of this temporality, so as to lift the weight of incommunicability from suffering. We are tasked with examining this temporality, since understanding the workings of suffering in their temporal dimension brings us closer to understanding the workings of evils.

Short of that, we cannot be cognizant of the measures to be taken up with a view to the twinned phenomenon of evil and suffering, which means that we are unable to relate to Ophir's theoretical tools as we relate to weapons in the struggle against the intolerable and unjust. To be sure, some of us are in the position to join the struggle, but some are not, which means that we enter the fray on their behalf. Without making visible the foundations of what I have called 'numeral ethics' and the internal contradiction of those who speak ever-so-loudly about their commitment to social justice while taking no notice of a suffering other who happens to be in the same room as they are, a singular one in distress stands no chance. Furthermore, the very act of extending a hand to a destitute other before or even while embarking on 'greater' ethical projects has no chance of becoming a moral exemplar, if not a model. We must make clear the value of addressing one singular other's suffering for the sake of everyone who is in pain, hungry, and cold, in the obscurity of abandonment.

There she stands, a suffering other, possibly a neighbor or some such ‘familiar stranger,’ failing to part the sea of clamorous well-wishers and empty-handed warriors of an utopian future.

She looks on, her gaze darkening the space around her, lost deep in her sorrowful questions, incessantly gnawing at her mind, pushing it further and further to its breaking point, like eternally hungry vultures circling around the tender prey.

*Why me?*

*Who will account for me?*

*What happens at the end of two hundred nineteen lions? What happens at the end of ten thousand or a hundred thousand water lilies?*<sup>555</sup>

## **Conclusion**

### **The Lamb Becoming a Lion; or, Hear me Roar**

His catatonic alter ego soon begins to speak, then to sing, and at last opens his  
blue eyes wide to the world.

—Gérard de Nerval

You don’t always have to cut with the sword of truth. You can point with it too.

—Ann Lamott

The explosion will not happen today. It is too soon . . . or too  
late.

—Frantz Fanon

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<sup>555</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Last Painting or the Portrait of God,” *“Coming to Writing” and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 127.

“Evil is an experience as old as history,” muses Alford in *What Evil Means to Us*. “In *The Symbolism of Evil* Paul Ricoeur characterizes the primordial experience of evil in terms of dread. *Kakia*, the New Testament term we translate as “evil,” has a similar sense... Dread is not the whole of evil, possibly not even its most important, but it is its ground: the dread of human beings, vulnerable, alone in the universe, and doomed to die.” Furthermore, he notes with succinct acuity, “people live an experience of evil, and it lives them.”<sup>556</sup>

In the final analysis, we affirm that an encounter with the evil of an other’s suffering is the origin of ethics. In responding to this instance of suffering, we utilize the tools given to us by Ophir’s insight into the superfluity of evil and Amery’s tormented desire for a different kind of agency in the face of suffering. We note that she who stands at the center of our ethical endeavors is a concrete, singular individual, the weak one, the one in moral and societal abandonment.

Who will defend the one in neglect when every act of postponement of relief is expressed as the imperative to study the structural conditions of evils in the hope of alleviating them on a greater scale in the future, as if thinking and action were not in fact interwoven and co-present and as if care for a single person were genuinely incompatible with greater-scale efforts, assigning it a negative value of inferiority upon offering relief to ‘only one’ individual?

Someone will. Someone *ought to*.

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<sup>556</sup> Alford, *What Evil Means to Us*, 4.

For if it is true that the value of a singular human being is decided in their hour of greatest need<sup>557</sup> and if the majority continues to privilege offering relief to the greatest number of people at the expense of the single suffering one, eventually the wretched ones will feel ‘knife blades opening within them’<sup>558</sup> and rise out of their abandonment in revolt, resulting in the collapse of rational dialogue and the eruption of violence, echoing Fanon,<sup>559</sup> the violence of the millennially forgotten ones under the mocking promise of a better future for everyone. Indeed, the possibility of the singular suffering ones, the ones who cannot wait and who do not have the privilege of patience, the forgotten ones, rising in violence, in the violence of those who have nothing left to lose, haunts this work like the memories of an unjust death might haunt a moral subject. If we continue to overlook a suffering other in our vicinity, the lamb will eventually become a lion and the ones steeped in the practice of continuous deferral will tremble before it. The never-ending excuses to hide under will crumble when the hour of righteous violence arrives and the winter will come for those indifferent to the victims they are in fact capable of extending a helping hand to.

In a less dramatic register, a similar collapse of dialogue takes place when someone is presented with the fact of an other’s suffering, twinned with a set of ways to alleviate it, i.e., even when moral response has been broken down into fairly straightforward theoretical ‘nuggets,’ exposing the mechanisms of relief, and distilled into an entirely feasible, even seemingly insignificant series of practices, only to turn

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<sup>557</sup> It is the chance for others to either take up their agency so as to alleviate the agony of the suffering one or fail to do so, turning away in indifference, which wears many masks and disguises.

<sup>558</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.

<sup>559</sup> “I had rationalized the world and the world had rejected me.... Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason.” *Ibid.*, 93.



away in indifference. According to Ophir, the antithesis to morality is not cruelty, but rather indifference, such that “indifference to someone who suffers superfluous evils is the end of moral interest and of the moral matter,”<sup>560</sup> which also means a deep failure to link “the acceptance of responsibility to a sense of self, as a creative, responsible agent.”<sup>561</sup>

It is, however, entirely in our power to alter moral axiology with the proper intellectual rigor in favor of a single life, to avert the collapse of any rational discourse between the addressees of one’s plea for help and the those who cannot wait in their torment, as well as the promise of violence on the part of the devalued and neglected both socially, morally, and interpersonally.

I submit that true ethics begins only when we respond to the suffering of a concrete other nearest to us and when we reject the unquestioned primacy of ‘good for the greatest amount of people,’ as utilitarianism would have it, which is rarely anything more than an excuse to turn a blind eye to a singular instance of suffering. Furthermore, true ethics begins when we learn to differentiate and exercise judgment vis-à-vis the victims and their particular circumstances in the name of moral urgency. In withholding judgment, we refuse to see the victims as particular, embodied individuals and their socio-political circumstances, with their distinct trajectories of suffering, which is to say that we refuse to see them at all. To be sure, we know that suffering is all around us, we feel bad about it, and that is that.

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<sup>560</sup> Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 12.

<sup>561</sup> Fred Alford, *Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 139.

As finite, singular, embodied beings, each in a different situation, with a greater or lesser means of remediation to offer, we become moral subjects when we engage with singular, equally finite others, such that our capacity to alleviate suffering is commensurate to those who address us. Barring that, our capacity for moral comportment, pitted against the overwhelming number of suffering others whom we are unlikely to ever meet, is nothing but an abstraction. If it is the case that conduct and choice depend on perception,<sup>562</sup> then it is also the case that currently we do not have the means to see the morality of saving one suffering other or *experience* one as irreducibly valuable and singular. Since a moral optics is an assemblage of perceptual patterns, cognitive habits, deep-seated values, intensive inclinations, clingy ideas, and an assorted collection of affective blind spots, it is up to all of us to do the work of making an other in distress morally visible.

Conversely, the first and the last instance of evil emerges when we abandon one singular person, that is to say, the weaker one, the overlooked one, the silent one. Worse yet, this practice of evil becomes fully acceptable and altogether socially and morally invisible when we justify abandoning one concrete other, that is, when we tacitly affirm and judge that one specific life in suffering is less important than multiple distant others, as if our uniquely situated, embodied capacity to offer relief to some people, but not to others, who are just as deserving and yet whose suffering is inaccessible to us and prevents us from taking up the position of the addressee, had no moral relevance whatsoever.

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<sup>562</sup> Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, 246.

One of the key tasks of this work has been to make visible and to articulate with every precision I could muster not only the moral value of offering relief to a single person in torment, but to argue that it is the forgotten, archaic core of all ethical endeavors. Furthermore, “by stressing both consequences and those affected by them is utterly real, gravity is given to our acts, showing them to matter in the world...”<sup>563</sup> The thrust of the task at hand has been to assign gravity to reducing the suffering of one other.

As the famous Riddle of Bologna goes,

*This is a tomb without a corpse,*

*This is a corpse which is not contained by a tomb;*

*but the corpse and the tomb are one and the same.*<sup>564</sup>

Radically together yet forever without each other. Perhaps the answer has something to do with life and death. The latter is part of the former only insofar as we see it as the first and the last enemy. The enemy always triumphs, yet we go on fighting it.

If we apply this maddeningly cryptic logic to evil and suffering, we realize that we take up the fight not because we are certain that we will eliminate suffering for once and all, but because we owe it to those in torment right now, in our proximity, because the moral grain within us can find its expression in appropriate practices and ways of behavior, because we have the potential of becoming luminous, sublimely fierce warriors

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>564</sup> This cryptic Latin inscription was discovered in the 16<sup>th</sup> century on a tombstone near Bologna. It has challenged many thinkers for over four hundred years to come up with a solution. Mario L. Michelangelo, for instance, published a 400-page manuscript dedicated to the riddle in question. Carl Jung addressed the enigma in his *Mysterium Conjunctionis* and Gerard de Nerval referred to it in two of his tales. To this day, no solution has been found. Source: personal notes.

of intensities and the kneading of clay-like moral time, in the name of a singular suffering other.

I am fully aware of my possibly naïve faith in the existence of moral sensibility, to use Ophir's term. If it is coupled with a more fine-tuned moral practices and a rigorous theoretical assemblage, which is something I have attempted to sketch out, will 'stick around' long enough to become part of what I called 'moral imaginary,' i.e., the provenance of acting a certain way in the face of suffering, as a matter of course. When you're a cripple, you find out who's decent and who's professed care isn't worth a dime very quickly, even if you start out as a slow learner. In an act of the testimony of an almost-fully disabled woman, I submit that I have seen genuine moral comportment and I do not know why it cannot be amplified.

My hope is that failing to respond to the plight of one specific individual will eventually be seen as a type of evil, the evil that hides in plain sight and has gradually amassed a plethora of justifications, to the point of almost disappearing from our moral horizon altogether. This inquiry attempted, among other things, to give expression to the crime of overlooking a single other. If the present work contributed to the thinking that abandoning even a single person in one's proximity is the veritable scandal and the clearest expression of the insidiousness of evil, that evil *begins* with walking away from the one in need of urgent relief, that facing neglect and indifference when the addressee of an other's cry for help is perfectly capable of *acting otherwise and yet chooses not to* forever splinters the sufferer's mind due to their inability to comprehend such indifference, then all my struggles will not have been for nothing.

As I've learned that I am not allowed to make any edits after the submission of the dissertation, the finality of my last edit and my last words here began weighing down on me. As I am making this very final edit, I want to believe that somewhere, someplace, a fierce, oversized swan takes to the blackening sky.

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