

# “Bound to the Other before any other Social Contract” Responsibility, the Socio-Political Order, and Beyond, according to Emmanuel Levinas<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

*For a Citizenship Education that is ethically qualified we need a view on our human social life that is also ethically qualified. For that purpose, we look towards the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995)<sup>2</sup> on the face and responsibility, the socio-*

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<sup>1</sup> If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

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<sup>2</sup> The cited studies of Levinas are listed below in alphabetical order. References and citations in the text are indicated with an abbreviation of the available English translation, along with the cited pages: AT: *Alterity and Transcendence*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999; BPW: Emmanuel Levinas. *Basic Philosophical Writings* (edited by A.T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, R. Bernasconi), Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996; BV: *Beyond the Verse. Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994; CPP: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster, Nijhoff, 1987; DF: *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1990; DO: *De l’oblitération (Entretien avec Françoise Armengaud à propos de l’œuvre de Sosno)*, Paris, La Différence, 1990; EE: *Existence and Existents*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1978; EI: *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1985; EN: *Entre nous. Thinking-of-the-Other*, London/New York, Continuum, 2006; HO: *Humanism of the Other*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2006; GDT: *God, Death, and Time*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2000; GCM: *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998; I: *Ideology and Idealism (followed by discussion)*, in M. Fox, ed., *Modern Jewish Ethics*, Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 1975, 121-138; IRB: *Is It Righteous to Be. Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by J. Robbins, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2001; SD: “Le surlendemain des dialectiques”, in *Hamoré*, 13 (1970), nr. 50, 38–40; NTR: *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990; OB: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff, 1981; OS: *Outside the Subject*, London, Athlone, 1993; PN: *Proper Names*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1996; SM: “Sociality and Money” (translation: Anya Topolski), in R. Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other: A Multidimensional Ethic of Responsibility in Levinas*, Bangalore, Dharmaram

political, and beyond. We start with the question that Levinas poses regarding the ethical foundation of human social life; namely, whether the socio-political order flows forth from the struggle of all against all (Hobbes), or whether that order is inspired by and constructed on the basis of the responsibility of the one for the other. From his reflection, it will become clear how civilisation starts from the tribal but likewise requires a vision 'beyond-the-tribal'. Subsequently we shall sketch how people's responsibility for each other must be organized into structural justice, 'state' and 'the political' (polis – le politique), prior to 'politics' (la politique) as a system and technique of elections, representation, democratic rules of the game, commission work, etc. At the same time, we shall argue how the socio-political order should never have the last word on humanity and humaneness. Hence, our attention for that which goes 'beyond-the-political'; namely, an always better justice, human rights, and last but not least the 'little goodness' as a lever in society and as a promise for the future.

## 1. Global Perspective: The Tribal and Beyond-the-Tribal

As a starting point, we follow the lead of the global question that Levinas poses regarding the foundation of human society: "It is very important to know whether the state, society, law, and power are required because man is a beast to his neighbour (*homo homini lupus*) or because I am responsible for my fellow. It is very important to know whether the political order defines man's responsibility or merely restricts his bestiality" (I 137–138) (cf. also EI 80; GDT 183).

### 1.1. 'Are we wolves to one another or each other's keepers?'

The double, contrasting perspective that Levinas evokes here –namely, two conflicting ways of founding society, reflects the global area of tension that Levinas raises between 'being' (Essence) and 'otherwise than being' (*beyond Essence*) (OB 3–4). The first option, namely that of 'being', reflects according to Levinas the Hobbesian approach. Insofar as the 'being' of living beings, and thus also of the human person who consciously takes one's life upon oneself,

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Publications, 2009, 115–123; TI: Totality and Infinity An Essay on Exteriority, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff, 1979; TO: Time and the Other, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1987.

is marked by 'interest' as 'attempt at being' (*conatus essendi*) (AT 99), the 'natural state' of the egoism of all leads to a war of all against all. This condition of conflict, which is to everyone's disadvantage, can only be resolved by means of a compromise, whereby all temper their egocentric claims (TI 83). The result is an agreement to postpone conflict and war and to broker peace so that a reasonable, i.e., agreed upon domain is accorded to everyone for their self-interested exercise of freedom. In order to realize this consensus, one must indeed be prepared to make use of reason. After all, one is only prepared to give up something when this is utterly unavoidable, meaning to say insofar as it is necessary to evade the violence of others. The reasonable peace that is achieved thus however turns out to be only an imposed, fair arrangement of opposed forces, in an unstable and temporary balance of power of mutual tolerance (EN 163). It remains an 'armed peace', directed at a tempered satisfaction of everyone's needs, but at the same time trying to satisfy them as much as possible, without having the freedom and happiness of the others being jeopardised too much. In this way, deadly self-interest becomes a shared and mutual, i.e. viable, self-interest (OB 4–5).

But the following is clear for Levinas: the underlying aspiration of the realization of everyone's interest, which is the origin of the "war of all against all", does not undergo an essential change: "the persisting in being, interest, is maintained" (OB 5). The social and political compromise is not based on a fundamental questioning, but only on a factual delimitation. Not only the achieved peace remains unstable, so that we are not safeguarded from new conflicts and wars, but the weak persons and the minority groups, who exercise little or no power, remain forgotten or pushed away to the 'underside' of society as '*quantité négligeable*'. They remain victims: historiography remains written by the conquerors (TI 228). Moreover, the state that has to suppress the violence of people who act like 'wolves towards each other' is itself violent whereby violence acquires a good conscience (IRB 68).

## 1.2. The naked face of the other and our responsibility

Hence Levinas began to search for another foundation, an ethical inspiration for society and state: “I try to deduce the necessity for a social rationale of the very exigencies of the intersubjective. Politics must be able in fact always to be checked and criticized from the ethical” (EI 80). Levinas finds this ethical ‘soul’ in the responsibility-by-and-for-the-other. It is now, in and outside Levinasian circles, very well known how ethical responsibility does for him not simmer up from the self but is ‘established’ as an appeal by the face of the other. The face of the other reveals the strength of a radical alterity that is at the same time naked and vulnerable: “the transcendence of the face is also the strangeness-destitution” (TI 75). According to Levinas, the nakedness of the face has many faces: “The word *face* must not be understood in a narrow way. This possibility for the human of signifying in its uniqueness, in the humility of its nakedness and mortality, (...) can come from a bare arm sculpted by Rodin. In *Life and Fate* Vassily Grossman [see below] tells how in the Lubyanka prison in Moscow, before the infamous gate where one could convey letters or packages to friends and relatives attested for ‘political crimes’ or get news of them, people formed a line, each reading on the nape of the person in front of him the feelings and hopes of his misery” (EN 201). In an interview with Françoise Armengaud (March 17, 1988), Levinas refers to “the erased, obliterated faces” (*les visages oblitérés*) by the sculptor Sacha Sosno: “Sosno, who replaces the face with an empty square or a hole, evokes the same meaning of the face precisely through that brutal negativity” (DO 90).

In and through its vulnerable nakedness, the face awakens in the subject an ethical crisis that summons me in spite of myself to responsibility and chooses me. This responsibility begins not as a ‘good feeling’ of spontaneous altruism but rather as the temptation to kill – which at the same time is a prohibition to kill. Indeed there are many ways of crushing the other (IRB 53) to which Levinas time and again pays attention: indifference (HO 26), rhetoric (TI 70), intimidation, power abuse and tyranny (CPP 16), exploitation and terrorism (AT 132), hatred (TI 239), racism (IRB 111) and anti-Semitism (DF 281), up to and including the total negation of murder (TI 198). ‘Thou shall not kill’ not only forbids the violence of murder: it also concerns all the slow and invisible killing

committed in our desires and vices, in all the innocent cruelties of natural life, in our indifference of ‘good conscience’ to what is far and what is near, even in the haughty obstinacy of our objectifying and our thematizing, in all the consecrated injustices due to our atomic weight of individuals and the equilibrium of our social orders” (TN 110–111).

‘Otherwise than being’ takes on a positive form in the responsibility for the other that spans over an entire spectrum of “works” (HO 26), starting from first benediction of saying “hello” (*bonjour*) (AT 98) and the “small élan of courtesy” of “the ‘après vous’ [after You] before an open door up to the disposition – hardly possible, but holiness demands it – to die for the other” (IRB 47): respect and recognition of the irreducible otherness of the other (justice in the broad sense) (TI 72), proximity and goodness full of insatiable desire (HO 30), not letting the other alone in the hour of death (EI 119), “the very perfection of love” (IRB 58). What is important to emphasize is that all these – and all other possible – forms of responsibility are for Levinas forms of ‘incarnation’. What we are dealing with here is more than a factual or coincidental modality. On the contrary, it is about the essential condition of responsibility itself in the sense that it is always earthly and bodily (OB 53). A correct understanding of this incarnation not only means that the “word becomes flesh” but likewise that responsibility implies the care for the being of the other. With this, the initial dualism between ‘being’ and ‘otherwise than being’ (OB 15) – and between ‘the same’ and ‘the other’ (TI 31) – is surpassed. Responsibility applies itself “beyond the very own being (of the I)” to “the being of the other” whereby one’s own being is also transformed. Here, the idea of “the Good above being” is likewise revealed (EE15), a goodness that cannot be confused with happiness (IRB 66). “I think it is the discovery of the foundation of our humanity, the very discovery of the good in the meeting of the other. I’m not afraid of the word good, the responsibility for the other is the good. It’s not pleasant, it is good” (IRB 46–47).

### **1.3. From ‘the tribal’ to ‘beyond-the-tribal’**

Levinas synthesises this movement from ‘being’ (interest) to ‘otherwise than being’ (disinterestedness), as the foundation for social life by means of invoking the contrast between ‘the tribal’ and ‘beyond-the-tribal’. The tribal

expresses the striving for identity of the self-interested being (*conatus essendi*) as a starting-point but not as an end-point. There is not only an individual but also a social identity. The individual identity, namely the 'I' as 'the same' par excellence, is based on characteristics, the daily experience of diversity: "There is individuation of human bodies, but one can also individuate souls, by character, by tastes, by intellectual level, by good qualities or by psychological faults" (IRB 110). There is also the social and also, equally the philosophical or religious (convictional) identity: family, descent, ethnicity, nationality, culture, religion or other convictional forms, realized through all kinds of so-called 'natural' and constructed 'brotherhoods', based on similarities and 'recognition'. Behaviours, symbols and rituals, traditions and folklore, convictions, doctrines, clothes (uniforms) and flags or greetings... 'make a difference'! This concise description of 'the same', understood as dynamic and expressive social identity, or 'the tribal', shows how important the acknowledgement of this individual and social identity is. Or as Levinas puts it: "the tribal is not proscribed, it comprises many virtues" (cf. full quotation infra). But for Levinas the tribal cannot be the end-point. After all, the tribal needs to be surpassed by the attention to the naked face of the other and the appeal to responsibility that ensues from it. "The moment in which fraternity attains its full sense is when, in the brother (*the alter-ego*), the stranger is acknowledged: the beyond-the-tribal. The other transcends every tribal link: radical otherness! It is not that the tribal is proscribed; it comprises many virtues. But in principle the human is the consciousness that there is still one step more to take: to appease the tribal, scandalous exigency!" (IRB 109).

That means that the responsibility of the one-by-and-for-the-other follows from a fraternity before every kind of free initiative and choice: solidarity as human condition, prior to any consciousness and active appropriation. We *are* each other's keepers: the intrigue or the plot of the Good in me! "I am bound to the other before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized. Here there is a relation of kinship outside all biology. The community with the other begins in my obligation to him. The neighbor is a brother. A fraternity that cannot be abrogated, an unimpeachable assignation... As a responsibility for the freedom of the other, it is prior to any freedom in me, but it also precedes violence in me, which would be the

contrary of freedom. For if no one is good voluntarily, no one is a slave of the Good” (OB 87, 138).

## **2. Social and Political responsibility**

After this general, orientating framework, we can now sketch in which manner the ‘otherwise than being’ of the ‘for the other’ appeals to create a humane and humanizing society.

### **2.1. From ‘face-to-face’ to socio-political justice**

In order to bring up the social in the strict sense of the word, Levinas refers to the fact of human multiplicity and the third. The multiplicity of the others makes it necessary to bring the responsibility of the one-for-the-other into balance with the other, equally unique persons. This “simultaneity of everyone” (IRB 51), also called by Levinas as “the excellence of the multiple” (EN 96), provokes a crisis of the original face-to-face (AE 157). We can also call it the tragedy of the face-to-face, in the sense that the exclusivity of the one towards the unique other tends towards exclusion. Thus the evil as shadow of the good reveals itself, in the sense that a reverse-side is attached inadvertently to the good of the face-to-face, namely the risk of negligence towards the absent others.

This possible perversion of the face-to-face introduces the ethical necessity of justice in a strict sense, namely the appeal to equal and impartial treatment of everyone in “a true society” (EN 17). Being responsible for many others, for everyone, we must confront and judge, weigh and measure, classify, distinguish and consider, regulate and organise, in short “moderate” (EN 168, 199). “There is the problem of choice, priority... Here is the problem of *ratio*. Exigency of a judgment but, from there on, exigency of a comparison – equity, balancing, compromise – between uniques and their return to the common genus” (IRB 50–51). Levinas makes mention again here, however, of the paradox of evil as the reverse-side of good. However necessary it may be for a fair treatment the comparison of the many others, and however inspired by the good of the responsibility-of-the-one-for-the-other, justice exhibits “a first

violence” (IRB 51, 56), precisely because – in all its ethical inspiration – it makes an effort to do something that actually is not possible, or rather is not allowed: comparing the incomparable. Even though reciprocity creates order in the chaos – the essential excessiveness – of the initial face-to-face, with the gratuitousness and unconditional grace of its extravagance and disproportion (EN 198), the balance achieved comes at the cost of the unicity of each individual other (IRB 51). Levinas, moreover, points to the risk of forgetting the original ethical inspiration, namely that in the objectifying calculus and comparison of people with each other, we may lose sight of the responsibility of people for each other, which is the primary and ultimate concern: “In this forgetting, consciousness is born as a pure possession of self by self, yet this egoism, or egotism, is neither primordial nor ultimate. A memory lies at the bottom of this forgetting” (GDT 183). It pertains to a contrary remembrance that can be pushed away easily: a forgotten remembrance, or better a remembrance that one tries to forget through superficiality and negligence... without the remembering itself disappearing entirely. It can at any time be awakened out of its slumber, concretely speaking by certain ‘unbearable’ facts of injustice and evil (cf. *infra*).

And still not everything has been said about justice. It must after all still be translated into organisations, institutions, structures. The many others are literally also third-parties, in the sense that they are not present here and now. Being absent, these third-parties can only be reached indirectly, namely via ‘mediations’ (*Vermittlungen*) (Hegel). The universal responsibility for everyone, in other words, needs “the political” (IRB 53) in the sense of Aristotle’s concept of the “polis” (EN 90), which Levinas also calls the “state” (SM 123). In order for it not to be turned into its contrary, the face-to-face must substantiate its ethical concern for the neighbour and the one far-off (OB 157) by means of all sorts of social, economic, juridical, legal and political arrangements, including international and global structures. To reflect synthetically this complex system of mutually linked and interactive social, economic and political forms and arrangements, we shall further refer to ‘the socio-political order’.

According to Levinas what is exceptional in that regard is that in this “true society”, surpassing the “intimate society of the I–You” (CPP 31), money also



plays an indispensable role, not only economically but also socially and politically (CPP 44–45). “Through money things lose their substantiality, they are ‘de-substantialized’, so that they can be sold and given... and circulate. Through money possessions are ‘de-possessed’. During the event of exchange – wherein money inserts itself, in which it begins its role as mediator and to which it does not cease to refer – people then have recourse to the other in the encounter that is neither simply the sum of individuals, nor the violence of conquest... The event of exchange – rooted in objectivity, universality, exchangeability of goods and services (TI 162)] – is a totality that is an affront to the face of the other: “addressing each other, declaration of peace – *shalom*” (SM 80). It does not come as a surprise then that Levinas criticizes Heidegger’s view on ‘authentic life’ as too spiritual, precisely because he says nothing about money: “[In Heidegger] there is no philosophy of commercial exchange, in which money (which would be simple *Zuhandenheit* [readiness-to-hand?]) is a means of measurement making equality, peace, and a ‘fair price’ possible in this confrontation, despite and before its *Verfallen* [fall] into an enslaving capitalism and Mammon” (EN 195).

Here Levinas goes farther than Buber who only broadens the ‘I–thou’ into a ‘we’ of reciprocal presence, while politics and the state, thanks to their objective and structural character, generalize the responsibility of the one-for-the-other without each individual having to be present with every other (which after all is not possible, as we have explained above) (PN 32–35). “The Bible (*wisdom of love*) needs Greece (*love of wisdom*): political thinking. We must pass by the way of logic, we must make comparisons, we must say who is guilty – and this is only possible in the State. Institutions and juridical procedures are necessary. Necessity of the State!” (IRB 67).

## **2.2. Ambiguity of socio-political justice and the need for an always better justice**

Notwithstanding this primary, original, positive meaning of economic, social and political structures Levinas is no less blind to the ambiguity, or stronger still the dark side of the socio-political justice. Again the idea of crisis appears here. In further analysis it will be made apparent how this is not so much about a factual but an ethical crisis of institutionalized justice. Time and again he refers to “the rigours of *dura lex*” (EN 199). He again discovers herein the evil as reverse-side of the good. This means that this evil does not refer back to a

bad intention but flows forth from the objective, historical form of this good. Through this, the classic saying ‘the way to hell is paved with good intentions’ acquires a surprising meaning. Levinas literally translates the strictness and even the mercilessness of politics that occurs in and through both small and large institutionalizations as follows: “Hence the recourse of justice to the strategies and clever dealings of politics: the rational order being attained at the price of necessities peculiar to the state. Necessities constituting a determinism as rigorous as that of nature indifferent to man, even though the justice may have, at the start, served as an end or pretext for the political necessities. An end soon unrecognized in the deviation imposed by the particularities of the social, economic, legal and political system” (OS 123).

This means that a just political system like every just social organisation always falls short with regard to its source and intention, namely the face-to-face and the responsibility of everyone for everyone. Moreover, this is not coincidental but unavoidable since this shortcoming flows forth from the nature of politics itself. With this Levinas reaches a very different finiteness than the subjective finiteness of the ‘mortal I’ à la Heidegger. For this reason he explicitly puts forward the ethical necessity of an always better justice (*une justice toujours meilleure*): “The rigours (of structural justice) have always to be mitigated. Justice always to be made more aware – more remembering – of the original ‘one-for-the-other’. (...) A justice always to be perfected against its own harshness, through a ceaseless deep remorse of justice: legislation open to the better. It attests to an ethical excellence and its origin in for-the-other from which, however, it is distanced – always a little bit perhaps – by the necessary calculations imposed by a multiple sociality, calculations constantly starting over again. (...) A bad conscience of justice” (EN 199).

### **2.3. Perversion of the socio-political Good**

However, when “organized justice ‘forgets’ her bad conscience, she risks sinking into a totalitarian and Stalinist regime, and losing, in ideological deductions, the gift of inventing new forms of human coexistence” (EN 199).

It is precisely here where the later Levinas time and again refers<sup>3</sup> to the novel of the Russian assimilated Jew Vasily Grossman (1905–1964): *Life and Fate*.<sup>4</sup> The manuscript was offered for publication in Moscow in 1960 but it “was seized and all its copies, including the typewriter carbons, were confiscated” (TN 88). Only in 1980, after a copy of the work was saved, did it appear in Switzerland (Geneva) both in Russian and in French. Levinas was very much impressed by this “overwhelming testimony of prime importance” which he read in Russian (IRB 80). Grossman was war correspondent for the Red Army newspaper, *Red Star*, reporting on the defence of Stalingrad, the fall of Berlin and the consequences of the Holocaust...

The interest here lies especially in the way in which Levinas has integrated certain ideas from the novel of Grossman into his social-ethical thought, or rather in how he found in it a sounding board for certain ideas that he offered already earlier and which he brought into greater focus through his reading Grossman.

Initially and for quite some time Grossman saw in the communist regime the arrival of the eschatological times: “The Soviet writer certainly believed, in October of 1917, that he had entered into the times of eschatological events, so to speak. His work prior to *Life and Fate* expressed that hope and that faith with talent and sincerity. In his book, which is about the defence and victory of Stalingrad, he expressed ample *hommage* to the glory of the Red Army and the Russian people, and recognized the truth of that glory in its abnegation and sacrifice” (TN 88). This ‘faith’ should not be treated scornfully. Even Levinas acknowledges that he was enthusiastic about the ‘new regime’ as the beginning of all fulfilment: “I was very young in February 1917 [11 years] when the Czar abdicated. I didn’t remain indifferent to the temptations of the Leninist revolution, to the new world which was about to come. But without

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<sup>3</sup> See especially: “Beyond memory” (December 1985) (HN 88–91, 135). Also see the interviews: Anissimov, 1985 (IRB 89–90); Burggraefe (April 1986) (Emmanuel Levinas et la socialité de l’argent, Leuven, Peeters, 1997, 46–47); Poirié, April-May 1986 (IRB 79–81); Benchelah, 1986 (AT 106–109); J.M & J.R. (Autrement, 1988) (EN 199–200, 219); Armengaud, 1988 (DO 20).

<sup>4</sup> V. GROSSMAN, *Life and Fate*, London, Vintage Books, 2006. Further referred to as G.

the engagement of a militant” (IRB 27). The fascination, however, was turned into its contrary, even with Grossman, slowly but surely. In his book he describes “at once cold and inspired, the Stalinist reality, in all its horror” (TN 88), “the Stalinist perversion and its aftermath” (BV 8). Without shame he situates Stalinism on the same level as the terrors of the Nazi regime (AT 106–107). This is made apparent among others in the fact that Stalin improved his system of camps by means of learning from the Nazis who organized their concentration and extermination camps in a systematic manner. The Stalinists tried to develop their camps into a rational, scientifically founded order that stood as a model for the collective well-being outside the camp (G 827–830). Levinas discovers – not without shudder – in Marxism, to which Stalinism appeals for its historical form, a certain affinity with his own thought on the priority of the other and our radical responsibility for the other: “In Marxism, there is not just conquest: there is recognition of the other. True enough, it consists in saying: We can save the other if he himself demands his due. Marxism invites humanity to demand what it is my duty to give it. That is a bit different from my radical distinction between me and others, but Marxism cannot be condemned for that. Not because it succeeded so well, but because it took the other seriously” (EN 103). But for that reason it is even more terrible that Marxism has turned into its own contrary, precisely thanks to Stalinism: “The circumstances of Marxism’s having turned into Stalinism is the greatest offence of the human, because Marxism bore the hopes of humanity; it may be one of the greatest psychological shocks for the twentieth century European” (AT 107). This anti-humanism is, certainly in Levinas’s eyes, a greater and even more radical crisis of humanism than the later so-called modern, structuralist anti-humanism “which denies the primacy that the human person, free and for itself, would have” (OB 127), and so clearing the place for subjectivity as by-and-for-the-other. In contrast to this, Stalinism turned its original prophetic generosity of ‘the one for the vulnerable, alienated other’ into its contrary: “the supreme paradox of the defence of man and his rights being perverted in Stalinism” (AT 132), and consequently “the greatest spiritual crisis in modern Europe” (IRB 81). In the name of Good the evil of a “final political, social, economic... system” is organized. The Good made absolute contradicts and destroys itself!

In his book Grossman lets this unmasking be undertaken by Ikonnikov, who is treated by the others (Soviet prisoners-of-war) with a mixture of disgust and pity and looked on as a “holy fool” (G 10, 394): “Ikonnikov is feeble-minded. But a feeble-minded person can be inspired. This is the type that exists in Russia. It is the *Idiot* of Dostoevsky” (IRB 90). Only the voice of this “madman and simpleton” could be so clear and ringing (G 11). He saw the sufferings of the peasantry with his own eyes (G 12–13). He saw and exclaimed how collectivisation was carried out in the name of Good. This led him to the radical conclusion: “I do not believe in the [your] Good” (TN 91 – G 13). In his commentary Levinas also quotes from the “scribblings” (G II chapter 15) of this “dirty, ragged old man” (G 13): “I have been able to see in action the implacable force of the idea of social good born in our country. I saw it again in 1937; I saw that in the name of an idea of good as humane as that of Christianity, people were exterminated. I saw entire villages starving; in Siberia I saw the children of deported peasants dying in the snow. Terrible Good!” (TN 91 – G 390). Therefore, his pessimistic conclusion: “I don’t believe in the Good” (TN 91 – G 13).

For Levinas, this social and political perversion of the Good is not just a historical fact, like Ikonnikov does not shy from the comparison with other historical figures, like Herod: “Even Herod did not shed blood in the name of evil; he shed blood in the name of his particular good” (G 39). Even Hitler went as far: “You ask Hitler, and he’ll tell you that even the camps were set up in the name of the Good” (G 13).

Long before Ikonnikov-Grossman, in a short article “Le lendemain des dialectiques” (1970) Levinas unmasked the Soviet regime as turning the good into evil: “the very alienation of the work of de-alienation: Stalinism!” (SD 40). Moreover, for Levinas this reversal of the Good into its own contrary is not so much a past historical fact, but a permanent possibility: “Every generous thought is threatened by its Stalinism. Ideology is the generosity and clarity of the principle which have not taken into account the inversion which keeps a watch on this general principle when it is applied” (BV 79). The perversion of the idea of the Good as a consequence of its organisation remains affixed to every economic, social, juridical, political organisation. Every social system (hospital, school, welfare...) is by nature conservative, in the sense that it can

be turned into its own contrary by raising itself up as the definitive regime, an absolute “system of salvation” (IRB 81), that gives a final answer to the needs of its ‘subjects’. It is not surprising that Levinas, in his attention for the social-ethical significance of money, is at the same time alert to the perversion of money as a ‘system of mediation’ into a monetary totalitarian regime: “the multiple conjunctures of the economic order – which sells so well on television – accumulations in power – or in ‘omnipotence’ – at the cost of human beings” (SM 116). That means that every (past or actual) social system, even the most ethical and noble (health care, welfare, development, asylum...) is – as system – by nature conservative, tempted to pervert its own ‘Good’ into its contrary (masked under the guise of being a messianic ‘regime of final salvation’...: “the forgetfulness (of the obligation toward the other) of which risks transforming the sublime and difficult work of justice into a purely political calculation – to the point of totalitarian abuse” (AT 170).

#### **2.4. Beyond the Political**

Hence according to Levinas, the political should never get the final word about the realisation of the responsibility of everyone for everyone. Ethically speaking, there is a need for a transcendence of the political. For that reason one who derives inspiration from the face-to-face can never be resigned to the form of justice achieved. For this ‘no resignation’ Levinas finds a point of contact in the Talmudic dialectics of “oral law” and its casuistic and contextual particularity, through its never-ending interpretations going beyond the “written law” and its universality (BV 78).

The refusal to be resigned can also be found in the notes of Ikonnikov, who refers to a Biblical text, namely Jeremiah 31:15: “In Rama a voice was heard, lamentation, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not”. A woman, Rachel, who has lost her children doesn’t want to be consoled... Nothing makes it acceptable or justified. “What does a woman who has lost her children care about a philosopher’s definition of good and evil?” (G 390) We also find the same verse in the gospel according to Matthew, where there is mention of the infanticide by Herod (Mt 2:16–18). It is not because a crime, a murder, is placed within a

larger whole – “is it not better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed?” (high priest Caiaphas) (Jn 11:50) – that it is then ‘in order’ and acquires a higher meaning, and is thus justifiable. In a society it is ethically necessary that victims of murder and terror and their relatives should not seek consolation..., so that evil is not covered up nor explained away.

Levinas likewise poses the question on how we can concretely see to it that no single regime can ever get the final word on justice and humanity. As an answer to this question he states that a ‘state’ – every socio-political order – has to be developed as a “liberal state” (EN 167), as an ‘open system’. Therefore it should not only be transcended by “an always better justice” (cf. supra), but also by human rights, to be understood as the rights of the vulnerable other. It is indeed characteristic how “in a totalitarian state, a mockery is made of the rights of man, and the promise of an ultimate return to the rights of man is postponed indefinitely” (OS 12). For that reason it is important to affirm the prophetic extra-territoriality of human rights: “The concern of the rights of man is not a function of the state, it is an institution in the state which is not of the state” (IRB 68). Human rights surpass all political power and all reason of state, and they can be invoked by every human person as person – and thus not only by every legally recognized citizen of a state. “This also means (and it is important that this be emphasized) that the defence of the rights of man corresponds to a vocation *outside* the state, disposing, in a political society, of a kind of extra-territoriality, like that of prophecy in the face of the political powers of the Old Testament, a vigilance totally different from political intelligence, a lucidity not limited to yielding before the formalism of universality, but upholding justice itself in its limitations. The capacity to guarantee that extra-territoriality and that independence defines the liberal state and describes the modality according to which the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible” (OS 123).

Inspired by – or in line with – Ikonnikov-Grossman, the first and last word ‘beyond-every-socio-economic-and-political-system’, according to Levinas, comes to “little goodness” (*la petite bonté*) because it persists beyond all social organisations and religions. Levinas summarizes his findings on little

goodness in the notes of Ikonnikov as follows (G 391–393): “In the decay of human relations, in that sociological misery, goodness persists. In the relation of one person to another, goodness persists. The impossibility of goodness as a government, as a social institution. Every attempt to organize the human fails. The only thing that remains vigorous is the goodness of everyday life. Ikonnikov calls it the little goodness. It’s a goodness without witnesses. That goodness escapes all ideology: he says that “it could be described as goodness without thought.” Why without thought? Because it is a goodness outside all systems, all religions, all social organisations. Gratuitous, that goodness is eternal. The feeble-minded are those who defend it and work at its perpetuation from one being to another. It is so fragile before the might of evil. It is a ‘mad goodness’, the most truly human in a human being. It defines man, despite its powerlessness, and Ikonnikov has another beautiful image to qualify it: ‘It is beautiful and powerless, like the dew’.” (AT 109)

There is more, however. This little goodness introduces a new view on the future of society. Paradoxically, Levinas qualifies the little goodness as unarmed but invincible (TN 90): “the little goodness does not win, but will never be defeated” (SA 47). This implies a reversal of the traditional idea of promise. To make his thesis clear, Levinas refers – in conclusion of his Talmudic lecture ‘Beyond Memory’ (TN 91) – to the last paragraph of the scribblings of Ikonnikov: “My faith was steeled, reinforced in Hell. It has emerged from the flames of the crematoria, from the concrete of the gas chambers... I have seen that it is not human beings who are impotent in the struggle against evil, but the power of evil that is impotent in the struggle against human beings. The powerlessness of little goodness, is the secret of its immortality. It can never be conquered. Evil is impotent before it. Prophets, religious teachers, reformers, social and political leaders are impotent before it. This dumb, blind love is human’s meaning. Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is the struggle of a great evil trying to crush the tiny seed of humnity. But if even now (by Hitlerism, Stalinism, genocides, terrorism ...) the human has not been destroyed in human beings, evil will never prevail” (G 394).

This does not mean that the struggle against evil becomes superfluous. Stalinism and Hitlerism, all forms of racism and anti-Semitism, tyranny and



terrorism... cannot be allowed to pass without hindrance. Standing up for the vulnerable and injured other – the ‘for-the-other’ – likewise implies on the economic, social and political levels that the struggle against totalitarianism and terror, whatever its persuasion may be, must be carried out. The responsibility by-and-for-the-other also acknowledges the possibility and factual choice for the irresponsibility of humans, namely the evil and the aggression against other humans. As for-the-other, the responsible subject is exceptionally alert for the evil that is legitimized in the name of the social and political Good as the goal of history, i.e., as the ultimate victory. Situations of terror and totalitarian repression are, in other words, ‘intolerable’ and form the boundary with tolerance (‘intolerance towards intolerance’), in the awareness that absolute and generalized non-violence abandon the victims of those forms of terror or totalitarianism to their fate. Here we arrive at the insight that the violence of the state against injustice and terror can be necessary and justified. But as ‘unrelenting struggle against unrelenting terror’, this struggle accords itself a good conscience and likewise a risk that it no longer questions itself (IRB 68). Then the hardness of violence is clad with reason and plausibility, whereby one’s own violence is barely seen as violence unless as acceptable ‘collateral damage’. In this regard, the good conscience of justified violence-against-violence is a conscience that is too much at ease, and thus often a conscience that appeases itself. Hence Levinas time and again warns that the war against war – even the so-called ‘just war’ (better: ‘the to be justified war’) – should never lose its unease, i.e., its ‘scruple or remorse’ (OB 6), literally ‘a pebble in the shoe’...

In this regard, he also points out how history all too often, and with manifest obviousness, recounts particularly the story of the winners where there is little or no room for the losers unless ‘as losers’. Don’t the victims in historiography become even more victims since they again function according to how the ‘survivors’ interpret the ‘works of the dead’ (TI 56)? “Historiography recounts the way the survivors appropriate the works of dead wills to themselves; it rests on the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts enslavement; forgetting the life that struggles against slavery” (TI 22). Hence the violence against violence should never acquire an ultimate significance. It remains, or rather it must remain, a struggle with a bad conscience with the intention of also questioning *and* surpassing itself. The bad conscience of the struggle ‘with all violence’ against violence should never be suppressed or ridiculed as weakness.

## 2.5. First and last beyond-the-socio-political-system: the little goodness (*la petite bonté*)

This bad conscience is the space for the little goodness that arises in the heart – or in the soul – of people during the most impossible and horrible conditions. Within and beyond every struggle, however historically unavoidable or necessary it eventually may be, from within the ‘soul’ – the longing-beyond-every-need – it breaks out without reaching completion in a world ‘where everything is fine’. It is precisely its smallness and vulnerability that makes it dynamic, namely it lures it into an ‘infiniting’, an infiniteness that is never infinite enough.

This leads Levinas to his plea for the “slightly anarchical ethical individualism” (BPW 24). Only the responsible ‘Me’ is ‘affectable’ by-and-for-the-other beyond every socio-political order (and its structures and systems). As ‘for-the-other’ the ethical subject incarnates the ‘difficult freedom’ of the Biblical prophet: although fully participating in society, he never coincides with, and thus always transcends the socio-economic and political order, judging ‘here and now’ (cf. the title of his work ‘Difficult Freedom’ – 1962). That explains why Levinas makes a radical distinction between the “judgement of history” and the ‘judgement about history’. According to the Hegelian concept of the ‘judgement of [by] history’ history itself and especially its end or fulfilment acquires the last word on all that has taken place (*‘die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht’*). But this “virile judgement of history, the virile judgement of ‘pure reason,’ is cruel” (TI 243), for its totalising method imposes silence on the unique and transcendent one who is responsible for the other. Precisely on account of this injustice a ‘judgement about history’ is needed. The for-the-other should never lose its right to the last word’ (TI 243). Therefore, the idea of a ‘prophetic judgement’ represents the limit idea of a judgement that takes into account the essential offence that results from judgement (even a judgement that is rational and inspired by universal principles) (TI 244). From a point outside of history, all that has transpired in history is subjected to a critical judgement, so that no single historical truth that has rigidified into a system, not even on the basis of universal but abstract and impersonal ‘principles’, acquire a final significance. However, it is not because this judgment ‘comes from elsewhere’, that it does not raise its voice in order to judge. It is a voice that comes ‘from God knows where’, a voice that is not

unreal because it is soft and without violence. Rather it is a voice that, in spite of everything and time and again (up to infinity), makes social, economic, financial, juridical and political systems ‘feel uneasy’ and therein touches people – not only judging them but also affirming and summoning them – to an all-surpassing responsibility of the one for the other (TI 247).

Because the little goodness is an “ethics without ethical system” (IRB 81) it can only be substantiated by individual consciences. “There are tears that a civil servant (*of socio-economic and political organizations*) cannot see: the tears of the other. In order for things to develop an equilibrium, it is absolutely necessary to affirm the responsibility of each, for each, before each. In such a situation, individual consciences are necessary, for they alone are capable of seeing the violence that proceeds from the proper functioning of (*socio-political*) Reason itself. (...) The I alone – (*the touchable ‘Me’*) can perceive the ‘secret tears’ of the other, which are caused by the functioning – albeit reasonable of the hierarchy (*of the socio-economic, legal, hierarchical order*). Consequently, subjectivity is indispensable for assuring the this very nonviolence that the State searches for in equal measure (...) I am for the I, as existence in the first person, to the extent that its ego-ity signifies an infinite responsibility for another. Which amounts to saying that it is as if substance of the I is made of saintliness. It is perhaps in this sense that Montesquieu rested democracy upon virtue” (BPW 23). The unique, responsible subject – unique through its inalienable responsibility – is consequently indispensable in order to vouch for non-violence that – in the best case of an ethical inspiration of ‘by-and-for-the-other’ – is likewise striven for by the political order, but which is again compromised by that order as system and regime. In and through the little goodness, the one and unique I gives acknowledgement and confirmation to the unique other. In its modesty and almost cursory, unnoticeable movement it realises a form of respect by means of not taking possession of the other or not humiliating the other but by approaching and supporting the other in word or deed (EN 48-49). Therefore, against the critique of sentimentalism, Levinas states that the little goodness should not be reduced to “love as amusement” (*amour rigolo, amour rigolade*) (IRB 65). In its vulnerable unsightliness it is at the same time strong, in the sense that in

its modesty it is a critical driving force that unmasks the depersonalising horror (EE 57–60) of every socio-political order.

### **Conclusion: Call for a New Spirituality**

In conclusion I link together two quotes of Levinas where it turns out how the crisis and new vision on the future provoked in society by the ‘one-for-the-other’ as *otherwise than being*, up to and including the little goodness, also calls for a new spirituality, according to Levinas: “I was once asked if the messianic idea still had meaning for me, and if it were necessary to retain the idea of the ultimate stage of history where humanity would no longer be violent, where humanity would have broken definitely through the crust of being, and where everything would be clear. I answered that to be worthy of the messianic era one must admit that ethics has a meaning, even without the promises of the Messiah” (EI 114).

It is precisely out of this ethics of responsibility-by-and-for-the-other, without prophecies announcing a prodigious future following the inhumane trials (TN 90), that means “a disinterestedness without compensation [EE 90-91], without eternal life [*reward*], without the pleasantness of happiness, complete gratuity” (OB 6), does a radically new, ethical *and* religious spirituality flow forth: “I call ‘little goodness’ the *rakhamim* (divine mercy) of the Bible. It bears witness to a new awareness of a strange (or very old) mode of spirituality or a piety without promises, which would not render human responsibility – always my responsibility – a senseless notion. A spirituality whose future is unknown” (TN 135). Levinas points out how the word *Rakhamim* refers back to the word *Rekhem*, which means uterus (EN 92). Its meaning consists in bearing the other within the same until it is born: the heteronomy of the responsibility for the other makes possible the autonomy and the responsibility of the one being borne. In this regard *Rakhamim* stands for motherhood as an ethical event, and thus also for the motherhood of God (NTR 183). In conversation with Myriam Anissimov, Levinas expresses this new – and old – religiosity rather challengingly as follows: “The essential thing in this book (of Grossman) is simply what the character Ikonnikov says – ‘There is neither God nor the Good, but there is goodness’ – which is also my thesis. That is all what is left to mankind. (...) He always says: ‘There are acts of goodness which are absolutely gratuitous, unforeseen.’ (...) Even in hatred there remains a mercy stronger than hatred. I give this act a religious significance. This is my way of saying that the mercy

of God occurs through the particular man – not at all because he is organized in a certain way or because he belongs to a society or an institution. There are acts of stupid, senseless goodness....” (IRB 89).

In little goodness, being a mad and stubborn goodness, we encounter the exaltation of a weakness without cowardice, which Levinas also calls “sensibility” (OB 61), of which so much ill is said among the Nietzscheans (NTR 183): “A remarkable utopia of the Good or the secret of its beyond” (EN 199). Are we thus not entering a moment in history in which the good must be loved without promises? Perhaps it is the end of all preaching - ‘*everything will come right*’ -, guaranteed by an all-powerful god. “May we not be on the eve of a new form of faith, a faith without triumph, as if the only refutable value were saintliness, a time when the only right to a reward would be not to expect one? The first and last manifestation of God would be to be without promises” (AT 109). A future without the promise of an ultimate victory of Good over evil, but with the hope and certainty of the unconquerable nature of little goodness, even under Hitler, even under Stalin, even under ruthless (state) terrorism...

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