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# The Legacy of Auschwitz: Determining a New Sense of Intergenerational Responsibility.

Jennifer Scuro

*The College of New Rochelle, [jscuro@cnr.edu](mailto:jscuro@cnr.edu)*

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**“The Legacy of Auschwitz: Determining a new sense of  
intergenerational responsibility”**

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**The Society for the Philosophical Study of Genocide and the Holocaust  
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Jennifer Scuro  
Fordham University  
Post-Doc Fellow

**I. Introduction**

*[We] must speak of a post-Holocaust ethics ... After Auschwitz, the simple reaffirmation of pre-Holocaust ethics will not do anymore ... Ethics after Auschwitz must be characterized by openness to the Other (Roth 1999, xv).*

Emil Fackenheim’s observation that “Philosophers have all but ignored the Holocaust” (1985, 505) gives added urgency to John Roth’s call for a new approach to ethics in the wake of the Shoah,<sup>1</sup> which, if it is to be meaningful and not merely forgotten, must continue to be regarded in our own day as a crisis. The historical legacy of genocide and the potential for systematic execution that still remains in the world today requires a serious investigation that this paper will undertake. Neither a review of the political conditions for genocide nor as a historical review of its past, this is an attempt to take on and make intelligible the philosophical understanding of our responsibility as it is related to the passing of time in the wake of Auschwitz. To what degree does our understanding of time and our connection to the world remain in an anti-ethical suspension? To what extent can we, by way of an address to the legacy of Auschwitz, return an ethics of

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<sup>1</sup> My working understanding of Shoah here will draw specifically from both Primo Levi’s witness testimony of Auschwitz and Hannah Arendt’s diagnosis of totalitarianism as it crystallized in Nazi Germany.

responsibility to the historicity of the human being and the modern world we have constructed which to some degree remains unaccountable? Although we might consider it “past tense” and not presently relevant to our immediate world-project, the Shoah<sup>2</sup> presented such a horrifying possibility of extermination that we continue in an under-examined and therefore inadequately addressed relation with the legacy of this ethical crisis.

There is an ethical injunction that lies at the heart of Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophical work and it demands that each person answer for the Other in responsibility. This injunction manifests throughout his writings as a difficulty, a paradox without remediation, as a work to find meaningfulness beyond the play of being and nothingness, in excess of ontology. In the spirit of Levinas’ injunction that inspires a *call to witness* and here invites the following question: How can we resist and respond to the violence against alterity (which must include the latent alterity of generations past) implied by the aestheticization of the passage of time, and at the same time reorient the inquiry into the meaning of history toward the ethical?

Counter to the desires and epistemological motives of historical narrative that typically ignores the vulnerability of human finitude for the sake of uniformity, ethics as first philosophy struggles to find address, to say what these narratives leave unsaid and seeks metaphors that, at their best, defend the human against all forms of inhumanity and dehumanization.<sup>3</sup> The ethical injunction awakens a vigilance to the periphery,

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<sup>2</sup> Wherever possible, I will use the word Shoah instead of Holocaust in consideration of the undertones of the word. I am actually limiting my use of the word “Holocaust” to the degree in which it is a part of Primo Levi’s experience and Arendt’s political philosophy. There is a significant argument regarding the use of the word Shoah or “devastation” in part from Emil Fackenheim. Please see Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of the term Holocaust as having serious anti-Semitic connotations and a summary of Fackenheim’s arguments, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, (NY: Zone Books, 1999) pp. 28-31.

<sup>3</sup> The Shoah will be the exemplar of the modern capacity for inhumanity and dehumanization.

demanding attention for the vulnerable others who pass before us in time. Levinasian ethics in fact requires an *infinite* attention to the Other in a way that does not exhaust our capacity for constructing those metaphors that can respond to and trace the passing of the past.

Here I respond with a *serious perplexity* [*aporia*]<sup>4</sup> required by this command, and add an accompanying injunction: It is imperative that we continue to return to question our tradition of thinking because the meaning of history should not and can never be the same after the Shoah. With Levinas, however, we may begin properly to take into account the ethical import of the legacy of a world post-Holocaust, beyond its possible historical or political significance.

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## II. The Legacy of Auschwitz

For Hannah Arendt, the philosopher cannot ignore their immediate and intimate engagement with the world-of-affairs, because, most urgently, “[The] modern age is not the same as the modern world” (1958, 6). The automation and artificiality of the modern world, and its exercises of activity on a massive (and now global) scale with little or no political consideration, creates a novel condition of ‘thoughtlessness.’ This fundamental lack of genuine consideration for the world, apolitically written into our social relationships, requires a response. She makes this call for responsibility by simply asking, “nothing more than to think [about] what we are doing” (ibid.). The novel forms of alienation specific to the modern world are what she describes as a *flight from the*

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<sup>4</sup> Emil Fackenheim makes this argument in “The Holocaust and Philosophy” (*The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 82(10), 1985, pp. 505-514).

*earth into the universe* and *the flight from the world into the self*.<sup>5</sup> Since the work of thinking and the capacity to take action have parted ways (1958, 17), and encourage these new forms of alienation in the world-of-affairs, by her account, we remain ever more vulnerable to the conditions of totalitarianism. Implied in her descriptions of the epidemic “thoughtlessness of the modern world” in cooperation with her account of the banality of evil (exemplified by the Eichmann trial),<sup>6</sup> is an injunction against a long tradition that separates one’s thinking life from the world-of-affairs.

Arendt’s injunction against this vulnerability toward totalitarianism comes with a caution: at no point may we “dress up [this] horrible gutter-born phenomenon with the language of the humanities and the history of ideas” (1978, 302 nt.3). That is, the workings of our modern world have introduced a new phenomenon that has significantly altered the character of the relationship between philosophical inquiry and the *polis*. What has emerged with the inescapable legacy of totalitarianism<sup>7</sup> is not only a loss of the capacity for worldly thinking but also a suspension in our capacity for judgment – with the result that what should have been ethically impossible has now in fact been done and thus has become possible and real. If this is a legacy that we cannot escape as Levinas and others suggest,<sup>8</sup> *can we claim really to have ‘reckoned’ with this legacy?*

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<sup>5</sup> These are discussed by Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958). The retreat into the self is an observation of a modern form of alienation that we will translate into Levinas’ call for ethical substitution (the one for the other).

<sup>6</sup> “Arendt’s exemplar for ... evil was Adolf Eichmann, who struck her with what she called his ‘horrible gift for consoling himself with clichés.’ The horror of banality is that it is a moral failure utterly devoid of genius... [the] ‘inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else’” (Disch 1997, 134).

<sup>7</sup> In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the primary examples of totalitarian power for Arendt are the Nazis in Germany and the Communist Revolution in Russia (1976, 461, 463). Totalitarianism according to Arendt’s definitions is to be understood as new and different than tyranny – which up to this point had been the definitive unjust state and could be resisted by social contract and Enlightenment theories.

<sup>8</sup> See Levinas’ essay, “On Escape” (2003) and the desire to evade responsibility to the Other. I am including Fackenheim, Arendt, and Hans Jonas as part of this injunction.

The work of history has not quite responded to any of these implicit injunctions or broadened its outlook by attempting to alleviate the burden of this world-legacy of totalitarianism. This legacy takes with it the burden of the injunction, “Never again!”<sup>9</sup> An important step in this undertaking is to critique both the mechanistic system of signification that relies upon the metaphors of vision and sight, and its models for rendering history through *re-creation* and *restoration*, rooted in the desire for “*personal immortality*” (Levinas 1986, 349). In addressing ourselves once more to the inhumanity of which the modern world is now capable, we respond to these injunctions by determining a form of responsibility that can properly engage upon this infinite yet fundamental task.

First, Levinas offers that “I am commanded, that is, recognized as capable of a work” (1998B, 35). Levinas argues that we need to *trace* for beyond Being, even for the sake of some “small goodness” in the world (230),<sup>10</sup> listening for the excess that is also the exception, and to work for meaningfulness to the passing of time that is more ancient than recollection (2000, 218). In this way, we bring the Infinite into the finite, undergoing and internalizing the original demand of humanity: *Thou shalt not kill*.

So, the present question becomes: In what way could this work continue? The violent indifference<sup>11</sup> of totalitarianism has conditioned the world for a potential that is not merely political or social, but existential.

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<sup>9</sup> See Hans Kellner, “‘Never Again’ is Now” from *History and Theory*. “Put simply, the notion of non-repetition (‘Never Again’) filling an eternal present (‘is Now’), which is, in part, what I take the words to mean, **poses questions about time that are hard to answer**” (1994, 127 [boldface added]).

<sup>10</sup> Levinas is actually citing (and praising) this idea of “small goodness” to resist the violence of evil from Vassily Grossman in *Life and Fate* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), (1998B, 405ff).

<sup>11</sup> “Time as a relationship of deference to what cannot be represented and which, thus, cannot be expressed as *this*, but which is not indifferent. Nonindifference is a way of being disquieted, disquieted in a passivity with no taking charge” (Levinas 2000, 115-116).

To be uprooted means to have no place in the world ... to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all ... Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends on my being in contact with other men ... Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience (Arendt 1976, 475-76).

Arendt goes on to argue that the legacy of totalitarianism has symptomatically generated an indifference to human existence, evident in its political manifestations, establishing a vicious circle that has suspended all capacity to form common sense and rational judgment. Our insensitivity to alterity will remain dominant in the world as long as we depend on metaphors of mechanism and automation to describe human interaction. As the world continues to globalize, it will also develop intersubjectively as an uncritical social mass, incapable of genuine political relationships (as Arendt has described it), and in an ethical suspension, as I will argue. How then can we come to a meaning of being in the world that Levinas describes as “*profoundly* tied to other[s]” (2000, 93 [emphasis added])?<sup>12</sup>

Levinas’ ethical imperative demands a gesture toward the non-economic, because economic orientations tend to limit and reduce the importance of transcendence. And yet, the project of the modern world only works economically. Levinas calls for an a sensibility beyond mere ornament,

Everywhere one would have to find the sense beneath the meaning, beneath the metaphor, the sublimation ... [Then] economy ... alone would know the secret of a proper meaning prior to the figurative meaning ... sense would have but ... the worth of an ornament suited to the needs of a game (1998A, 86-87).

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<sup>12</sup> Here Levinas asks this question in the lectures published under *God, Death and Time*. He is discussing Bloch’s idea of ‘being-in-the-world’ as a being-at-home [*Heimat*], rather than a “temporality that hinges on the anxiety of nothingness,” implied by both Heidegger and Fink’s ontology.

Here, in order to defend sensibility from any economic reductions, we need to argue, at least in part, that *the metaphors we employ count*. In order to provide an alternative to the modern orientation toward a sensibility which only inspires a language of vision and illumination, we will argue in favor of our capacity as *listeners* and *hearers*, as witnesses who are one-for-the-other in responsibility. Thus, both privately and publicly in the work of listening and hearing, the subject, who is disrupted, disinterested and yet elected to respond, assumes the burden of responsibility for the neighbor, for the Other.

Primo Levi, as a survivor of Auschwitz, provides a critical springboard to an examination of this work that demands accountability.

Precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts; ... one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization (Levi 1961, 36).

Levi unmistakably implies that those who survive are in fact not the true witnesses to Auschwitz (1989, 83).<sup>13</sup> Obviously, this difficulty ends not with the liberation of the camps, or with the end of the war or with the trials in Nuremberg and Jerusalem. The power of mass execution removed from the world those people whom the executioners considered superfluous, and at the same time removed any possibility to demand for genuine accountability. The effect was to institutionalize the systematic dismemberment of humanity against any future potentiality for meaningful responsibility

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<sup>13</sup> For Levi, surviving the Lager includes the experience of shame, a phenomenon not directly discussed by Arendt: "It must be remembered that each of us, both objectively and subjectively lived in the Lager in his own way. ... We endured filth, promiscuity, destitution, suffering much less than we would have suffered from such things in our normal life, because our moral yardstick had changed. Furthermore, all of us had stolen ... Some (few) had fallen so low as to steal bread from their own companions. We had not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because, like animals, we were confined to the present moment" (Levi 1989, 75).

and recollection.<sup>14</sup> Here, we can maintain the aporetic character of this legacy, because the Shoah was not simply an intended genocide but an *aenocide*, the extermination of *generations*.<sup>15</sup>

James Hatley argues that the Final Solution was not intended not only for a specific population of people (a *genos* through genocide) but was intentionally a more extensive form of victimization. The specific extermination of children was intended to remove intergenerational memory, to “deprive a people of their generations” (2000, 30). For the victims, so thoroughly dehumanized, their deaths could not be mourned as a “death” because no one remained to mourn their loss and to give them proper burial.<sup>16</sup>

Levinas assesses the thoroughness and magnitude of the execution in this way,

It happens as though the multiplicity of persons ... were the condition for the fullness of ‘absolute truth’ as though each person, through his uniqueness, ensured a revelation of a unique aspect of the truth, and that certain sides of it would never reveal themselves if certain people were missing from mankind.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A discussion of Platonic recollection is to follow in the next chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Aenocide is James Hatley’s term. For the victims, their death could not be mourned as a ‘death’ if they were thoroughly dehumanized and no one existed to mourn the loss. Now, the ethical task becomes to deal with inheriting a legacy in which there is no longer anyone who was there, who survived the victims (“the true witnesses” of Auschwitz), the Shoah itself is then relegated to memory which no one can remember. With each generation that passes, we become inoculated to the aporetic character of this extensive dehumanization and violence.

<sup>16</sup> Parallel to this question of burying the dead, as a question within the field of fundamental ethical concerns, Tina Chanter does an assessment of Levinasian ethics and Sophocles’ *Antigone*. “For *Antigone*, there is precisely no dilemma ... never deviating from the line of duty ... she crosses the boundary between private and public. She elevates her duty to her brother above the political significance of his public action, and thereby transforms her familial duty into an act of political defiance.” Chanter also shows the connection between this transgression through duty and the feminine, “She expresses her commitment to Polynices by restoring honor to his life through performing burial rites at his death. But in order to do so she gives up her betrothal, and her hope to be a mother” (Chanter 1991, 140-141). This connection between ethics, testimony and the feminine will be further explored in Chapter Seven.

<sup>17</sup> Levinas *L’au-delà du verset*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1982), p. 163. [*Beyond the Verse*, Gary D. Mole, trans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.]

How then to *respond* to the violence, to the execution of generations rendered meaningless, to the witness who speaks in resistance? This is the carriage<sup>18</sup> of the witness: *a duty to remember* what has become dismembered by systemic violence. This position, as writer-witness, Levi accepts for himself (or rather, “undergoes”<sup>19</sup>) and is essential to finding meaning post-Auschwitz, speaking to the trauma of violence because “this was not an accident.”<sup>20</sup> In all of his observations this event of violence is not to be misunderstood as a matter of chance. Levi recognized – and we will take him as an authority – that this crisis in the world gives rise to a phenomenon in the role of memory regarding “man and the world.”<sup>21</sup> Those survivors desiring to forget the violence of the past and unable to stand to witness, slip into a condition of loss and trauma, true victims of the latent permanency to the wounds of violence. But the witness who gives an account of survival against a world made uninhabitable also initiates the possibility to discover meaning in these experiences insofar as the witness is able to formulate a judgment in the face of the unthinkable.

Levi allows himself to formulate this judgment:

[Most] Germans did not know because they didn't want to know. Because, indeed, they wanted *not* to know ... Knowing and making things known was one way (basically then not all that

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<sup>18</sup> Here, I am using the term in the sense of ‘conveying goods’ in the same way that Levinas uses *portant* [bearing or carrying].

<sup>19</sup> Levinas describes the idea of *conatus* [undertaking] when describing the subject as elected without yet being mediated in consciousness, by intentionality in an egoic act. As it regards the unmediated ipseity of this election: “In this sense the self is goodness, or under the exigency for an abandon of all having, of all *one's own* and all *for oneself*, to the point of substitution. Goodness is ... the sole attribute which does not introduce the multiplicity into the One that a subject is, for it is distinct from the One. ... The self is the very fact of being exposed under the accusation that cannot be assumed ... unlike the certainty of the ego that rejoins itself in freedom” From *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. (Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981) p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> Levi cannot excuse Auschwitz as a collective madness: “Hateful but not insane ... this systematic negligence became a useless cruelty, a deliberate creation of pain that was an end in itself” (1989, 106, 109).

<sup>21</sup> Which Levi identifies by his title as a ‘reawakening’. See, Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*. (Stuart Woolf, trans. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965).

dangerous) of keeping one's distance from Nazism. I think the German people, on the whole did not seek this recourse, and I hold them fully capable of this deliberate omission (1965, 215).<sup>22</sup>

It is the writer-witness, or perhaps poet-translator,<sup>23</sup> who must put words to the unspoken and unspeakable, to that which shames, that which cannot be undone, the loss executed with the dis-memberment of generations. To avoid finding ourselves the ease with which we could continue the dis-memberment that began with the exercise of a Final Solution, we need to avoid vilification while denying trauma, neither “choos[ing] not to remember,” nor giving in to a “desire to forget.”<sup>24</sup> The memories of the writer-witness and the events and deeds of the Nazis degrade into literature if we ascribe to the participants any semblance of heroism<sup>25</sup> or aestheticize the implicit viciousness of the relationship between victim and executioner.

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### III. Taking Responsibility for the Other

To respond genuinely to the suffering of those victimized by the silencing of *aenocide* and to “reproach ... the consuming power of discursive desire” (Kellner 1994,

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<sup>22</sup> This quote is taken from the Afterword of *The Reawakening*, “Primo Levi Answers His Readers’ Questions.”

<sup>23</sup> There are poems that Levi, a professed chemist, uses to express his relation to the task of witnessing. In Celan’s poetry he also finds voice for what even he, the writer-witness (as in the position of the Ancient Mariner), cannot explain. In this case, Levi’s testimony functions as a ‘language’ between the dead and the living – the drowned and the saved – and the language “survives.” See Agamben, 1999; 16, 89-90, 102, 161.

<sup>24</sup> This desire is coupled with the desire to escape responsibility; trauma as such cannot lead to the writing of history, a reconstitution of meaning post-Holocaust. “It is not through psychoanalysis, leading back to myths, that I can dominate the totality of which I am a part – but by encountering a being who is not in the system, ... language ... places us above the totality, and allows us to seek, if not uncover, the dupery of proffered truths” (1998B, 34).

<sup>25</sup> Wychogrod discusses this danger of glorifying the criminal by giving it infamy, rooted in the tradition of the hero epic as a way to mark history (Hatley 2000, 45-49). Also see Wychogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, (Yale University Press, 1990).

128), this project accepts the ethical demand for new ideas, a call for a framework that can resist and respond to this legacy. In the wake of this legacy, our traditional way of thinking of the past, and our presumed relation to the meaning of passing time, are now under *urgent consideration*.<sup>26</sup> Because, as Levinas states it, “Every complacency ... destroy[s] the uprightness of the ethical movement,” (1986, 353), the call to question the imbedded insensitivity of this world legacy reminds us that the meaning of historical existence is *intergenerational*. And each new generation continues to uncritically carry this legacy. Only last year, on the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Elie Weisel repeated the injunction that follows this legacy:

On occasions such as this, rhetoric comes easy. We rightly say, “never again”. But action is much harder. Since the Holocaust the world has to its shame, failed more than once to prevent or halt genocide – for instance Cambodia, in Rwanda, and in the former Yugoslavia. ... It is easy to say that “something must be done”. To say exactly what, and when, and how, and to do it, is much more difficult ... But what we must not do is deny what is happening, or remain indifferent, as so many did when the factories of death were doing their ghastly work.<sup>27</sup>

In the wake of a world-legacy, we need to continue the work of interrogating the inheritances and legacies that, at their foundation, destroy the capacity of the face-to-face relationship and are violent in regard to otherness, able to negate alterity.

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<sup>26</sup> This idea of genuine consideration comes from a distinction made by Arendt regarding the function of thinking as an activity, separated from other forms of activity like labor and work. Arendt also makes a distinction between reflective thinking, which can collapse the “the two-in-one” with this kind of thinking-in-action, properly political action which I am calling here, “genuine consideration.”

<sup>27</sup> Elie Wiesel at the Special Session of the UN General Assembly in honor of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz., January 24, 2005. See also Kofi Annan’s statements to the General Assembly on January 24, 2005 [[www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=1273](http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=1273)].

If there truly is a command to respond with every presence of an other [*autrui*], historical or otherwise, then the ethical response begins with *a proper hearing*.<sup>28</sup> To understand the task as it has been described here is to engage<sup>29</sup> in a work that desires neither to mask nor to silence the injunction of radical exteriority. Thus, when it comes to the lives of those who passed in the Holocaust, we must deliberately ask: What do we not hear? Have we really listened to the Other? Levinas argues that a “listening eye” (1981, 38) is required to respond to facelessness, in the name of those who have been effaced, even though “in approaching the neighbor,” (much less in pardoning the foreigner), he concedes, “I am always late for the appointed time” (1996, 106).

Since, for Levinas, ethics begins in listening for the call from another and then responding out of the command by the Other, when the plea or the cry of that other (‘from beyond’) is silenced, then the face of the other is forever more without response [*sans réponse*], in the position that Levinas describes as death.<sup>30</sup> This death is not benign, nor is it without demand. As Levinas describes it:

There is ... in the Face of the Other always the death of the Other and thus, in some way, an incitement to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to completely neglect the other – and at the same time (and this is the paradoxical thing) the Face is also the ‘Thou Shalt not Kill.’ A Thou-Shalt-not-Kill ... is the fact that I cannot let the other die alone, it is like a calling out to me (1998B 104).

The violence of the past continues and is regenerated through our *ignorance*, our inattention to the otherness that stands against and cannot be reduced to the selfsame. A

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to note here Derrida’s discussion of Levinas in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. (Pascale Anne Brault and Michael Naas, trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), and how he specifically remarks on the *sonority* of Levinas’ argument for the Other (114-117). This idea of sonority is important to the work *a-dieu* as Levinas describes it, “It signifies – beyond the contributions of memory, deliberation and violent force – an exceptional sonority which, in its irreducibility, suggests the eventuality of a word of God” (1998B, 172, Also 2000, 122).

<sup>29</sup> Derrida uses this term as well regarding Levinas – the commitment [*engagement*], (1999, 77).

<sup>30</sup> See Levinas’ discussion of death as the face *sans réponse* (2000, 9, 11-13).

double-victimization occurs with each “inattention” to the face, each erasure of the face, each *dis-regard* of and inattention to what is other than ourselves (or our self-interests). Fundamentally, ethics begins with a non-in-difference to the Other.<sup>31</sup>

Our argument here challenges the dominant (and very ‘Western’) contention that “selfhood” is the highest value of the human being, as if every individual were “born out of no Other.” Here we follow a critique of all “egological” thinking (1998B, 112) that ignores its responsibilities to the future and cannot *face* its responsibilities to the past. This is a legacy not to be dismissed or ignored. As Primo Levi states it, “Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and act without asking questions ...” (1965, 228).<sup>32</sup> The content of memory must be salvaged from simplistic syntheses and

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<sup>31</sup> Indifference, like inconsideration (as per my reading of Arendt), has the latent intention for synchronicity, suspicious and violent. On the other hand, “dia-chrony, the ‘difference’ of diachrony, does not signify pure rupture, but a non-in-difference and concordance that are no longer founded on the unity of transcendental apperception [Husserl], , the most formal of forms, which through reminiscence and hope joins time up again in re-presenting it, but betrays it” From Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987) p. 118.

<sup>32</sup> Levi goes on to list those functionaries: “like Eichmann; like Hoss, the commandant of Auschwitz; like Stangl, commandant of Treblinka; like the French military of twenty years later, slaughters in Algeria; like the Khmer Rouge of the late seventies, slaughterers in Cambodia.” The link can be made here to Arendt’s similar conclusions 1) that the rise of Nazism was not criminal but a systematic flaw in the ethos of the modern world (see *Origins of Totalitarianism*, especially pp. 460-463) and 2) Eichmann was a prime example of the sinister characteristic of the ordinary obedience conditioned in the modern world, i.e., the banality of evil. See *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*, (NY: The Viking Press, 1963), especially pp. 49-50. The strangeness of evaluating a case like Eichmann requires that I quote Arendt at length:

Foremost among the larger issues at stake in the Eichmann trial was the assumption current in all modern legal systems that intent to do wrong is necessary for the commission of a crime. ... Where this intent is absent, where, for whatever reasons, even of moral insanity, that ability to distinguish between right and wrong is impaired, we feel no crime has been committed. We refuse, and consider as barbaric, the propositions “that a great crime offends nature, so that the very earth cries out for vengeance; that evil violates a natural harmony which only retribution can restore; that a wronged collectivity owes a duty to the moral order to punish the criminal” (Yosal Rogat). And yet I think it is undeniable that it was precisely on the ground of these long-forgotten propositions that Eichmann was brought to justice to begin with, and that they were the supreme justification for the death penalty. ... And if it is true that “justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done,”

appropriations of words and deeds, economically constructed and aligned in a utilitarian narrative.<sup>33</sup> The consequence of this gathering into historical narrative is a *facelessness* continuously written and reified into the structure of the modern world. This facelessness underlies the automatic and artificial progress of a world constructed to evade “a past that ‘regards me’ and is ‘my business’ ... [yet] *a past that cannot be gathered into representation*” (1998B, 170-71 [emphasis added]). Fundamental to resisting the legacy of totalitarianism is that we will hold fast to the idea of responsibility for and acknowledgment of those who have passed, not as we would like them to have been, “for ourselves,” but as they were, rejecting any claim of significance that reduces them to a cluster of ideological interests. To maintain the memory of those gone before us will require a deeper and even more ethical understanding of the meaning of history that could *disable* rather than empower ideological thinking through propaganda. There is an ethical responsibility that lies between past and present generations that forbids us from capitalizing on the existence of others.

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then the justice of what was done in Jerusalem would have emerged to be seen by all if the judges had dared to address their defendant in something like the following terms: “You admitted that the crime against the Jewish people during the war was the greatest crime in recorded history, and you admitted your role in it. But you said you never acted from base motives, that you never had an inclination to kill Jews, and still that you could not have acted otherwise and that you did not feel guilty. We find this difficult, though not altogether impossible, to believe; ... You also said that your role in the Final Solution was an accident and that almost anybody could have taken your place, so that potentially almost all Germans are equally guilty. What you meant to say was that where all, or almost all, are guilty, nobody is. This is an indeed quite common conclusion, but one we are not willing to grant you. ... guilt and innocence before the law are of an objective nature, and even if eighty million Germans had done as you did, this would not have been an excuse for you...” (254-255).

<sup>33</sup> Arendt argues that utilitarian thinking is insufficient to counter totalitarian domination, “totalitarian governments ... started to operate according to a system of values so radically different from all others, that none of our traditional legal, moral, or common sense utilitarian categories could any longer help us to come to terms with, or judge, or predict their course of action” (1976, 460). From this, we can also get from Levinas that the effort to “gather together” – the work of the author for the sake of narrative – as “Gathered together, having come to its end and its goals, ... be dead, would it not be close to a thing and so, exhibited behind glass, exposed, like a portrait in a museum?” (2000, 35).

Through this effort to defend a sense of *non-in-difference* to the legacy of violence, Levinas describes ways to resist the *il y a* ('thereness') of existence,<sup>34</sup> exemplified by the haunting possibility of anonymous Being through an indifference to otherness.<sup>35</sup> He argues, "The relationship with another is a relationship that is never finished with the other; it is a difference that is a nonindifference and that goes beyond all duty, one that is not resorbed into a debt that we might discharge" (2000, 161). The work of genuine hearing, as a gesture of thoughtfulness and consideration (in the best sense of the word – as a taking of others into thinking<sup>36</sup>) and as a form of resistance to systemic violence requires that we take care not to reduce the testimony of the survivor to an imaginary past full of implicit and questionable desires. To efface human beings over time while continuing with every present moment in a globalizing, if not *consuming* world-project, is to compound a crime against humanity for which we are obligated to respond both in word and deed. As long as the world remains indifferent to the ethical

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<sup>34</sup> See Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. (Richard A. Cohen, ed. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985) for a discussion of the *il y a*, [there is, or *es gibt*]. Levinas also describes the *il y a* in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* as: "For me ... [the] 'there is' is the phenomenon of impersonal being: 'it' ... [what] the child feels [in] the silence of his bedroom as 'rumbling' ... In the absolute emptiness that one can imagine before creation – there is" (Alphonso Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) pp. 47-48.

<sup>35</sup> From Didier Pollefeyt in his critique of Leonard Grob's discussion in earlier chapter of *Ethics After the Holocaust* (1999), pp. 31-33. This is Pollefeyt's response to Grob's assumption that the self/other relation is a dichotomy (self is negative and otherness is positive). Pollefeyt argues for a deeper criticism by Levinas. He cautions that it is better to avoid reducing the self to a negative position ('imperialistic', 'egotistic') but rather show that the ethical self/other relation resists the underlying evil of the *il y a*, the neutral 'thereness' of being. The idea that existence can be neutral and have a condition of 'Care' is one way in which Levinas responds to Heidegger's *Dasein*.

<sup>36</sup> There is a philosophical importance to the work of genuine consideration, or, what Arendt also refers to as a thinking-in-company. The "revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them – that is in sheer human togetherness." She argues in defense of the function of thinking for the modern world, "For if no other test but the experience of being active, no other measure but the extent of sheer activity were to be applied to the various activities within the *vita activa*, it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all" (1958, 180, 325). Here, I am drawing a parallel between "thinking as consideration" and Arendt's discussion of Kant and her reading of the 'enlarged mentality' (of which we can associate violence with its opposite – inconsideration), out of our sociality, "one can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person's standpoint; otherwise one will never meet him, never speak in such a way that he understands ... one tells one's *choices* and one chooses one's company" See Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Ronald Beiner, ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) p. 74.

injunction posed by the de-facing of the past, more than just the dis-memberment through a selective forgetting, then our work remains to be done. We must still confront how this legacy continues to leave remains of violence, constituting and accelerating an insensitivity to otherness, in *an engagement that amounts to a hearing-loss*.

With Arendt, we listen carefully to the considerations of Walter Benjamin:<sup>37</sup>

Our consideration proceeds from the insight that the politicians' stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their 'mass basis,' and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing. It seeks to convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians continue to adhere (1968, 258).

A serious consideration of this complicity requires that we examine the idea of history wherever it serves a latent *faith in progress, an appeal to the masses* without restriction or differentiation, and perpetuates a *systematic indifference through mechanized movement* ("an uncontrollable apparatus"). In our struggle to find reparation for this loss of persons and failure of judgment that has now been inherited by anyone who is a part of the modern world, I have attempted to revisit the conceptualizations that encourage "genocidal behavior" or at least to merely open the door to these considerations. What we have found to be ethically inconceivable in reality should become an offense wherever it becomes a possibility. Philosophically and ethically, the attitude that we can

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<sup>37</sup> See Arendt's Introduction to Benjamin's *Illuminations* (NY: Schocken Books, 1968). "What is so hard to understand about Benjamin is that without being a poet he *thought poetically* and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language." (14). "And this thinking, fed by the present, works with the "thought fragments" it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization ..." (50-51).

go about our “business as usual” can in fact only perpetuate the wounds of mass violence and promote ignorance, contributing to the banal exercise of evil.<sup>38</sup>

In an early essay titled, “On Escape” [*De l'évasion*], Levinas acknowledges the desire to ‘escape’ and flee responsibility as a tendency for ontologizing, which includes the “instinct for possession” and “the instinct for integration” (2003, 50-51). The existential desire to flee responsibility is ethically questionable. Levinas suggests that “Despite its heroic conception of human destiny ... [the] individual is called upon to loosen the grasp of the foreign reality [*réalité étrangère*] that chokes it...” (49). Levinas refers to death as an excess and frames the meaning of death as *more* than mine, *more* than a nothingness infecting existence. He rejects as unsatisfactory Heidegger’s view of death as an impending threat.<sup>39</sup> Instead, Levinas suggests that the affectivity that accompanies the death a proximal other is never properly interpreted as a threat to me and my possible projects. For a human being, the death of a close other *affects* me *beyond measure* and leaves me *without consolation*.<sup>40</sup>

Because there is no *salve* for death, no solution to alleviate the burden of the question raised by the death of a proximate other, as Levinas argues, the death of the other becomes for me an interrogation, a disquiet [*le non-reposé*], “more intimate than

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<sup>38</sup> Here I am using terminology from Leonard Grob’s “Emmanuel Levinas and the Primacy of Ethics in Post-Holocaust Philosophy” from *Ethics after the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses*. John K. Roth, editor, (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> See Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1962), p. 294. Unlike Heidegger, who makes the death of another a *threat* (in which the possibility of my own non-existence becomes disclosed in anxiety), Levinas argues that the experience of death occurs when the condition of non-response *affects us*, (“affection *par excellence*”) when the one we love, who used to respond, responds no more.

<sup>40</sup> In *God, Death and Time*, Levinas cites the death of Socrates in the *Phædo*: “Beside those who find in this death every reason to hope, certain among them (e.g., Apollodorus, “the women”) weep more than they should; they weep without measure: as if humanity were not consumed or exhausted by measurement, as if there were an excess in death” (2000, 9). As the survivor, in the intimacy of an affection beyond measure, I become responsible to the one who is no longer responsive to me, yet “entrusted to me [*m’être confié*]” (2000, 12). Because death is a *scandal*, a *crisis* (“even in the *Phædo*” [14]).

any intimacy” (2000, 15), a soberness from “the ecstasy of intentionality” (223).<sup>41</sup> Death, to be significant beyond the ontological tendencies and desires, must be always considered a *scandal* in the ordinary course and ‘thereness’ of Being. Because each death is the ‘first death’ (14, 78, 90-91), it is a rupture that evokes a ‘distance’ that can be neither recovered and recollected, nor can it ethically be considered a “ripening” or a “fruition” (44, 41). For the survivor,<sup>42</sup> there exists a fundamental connection between death and the meaning of time, because “Death is the death of someone ... **the event of passing**” (71-72, [boldface added]). Here, the ethical connection between generations is in the engraving<sup>43</sup> of other as each new generation survives the past. There is an essential *uprightness* in facing this shared world-legacy and in answering the call to remain responsible to the passing of other generations. As Levinas contends:

a phenomenology of sociality based on the face of the other, reading in its uprightness, before all mime, a defenseless exposure to the mysterious aloneness of death, and hearing in it, before all verbal expression, from the depths of that weakness, a voice that commands, an order to me signified, not to remain indifferent to that death, not to let the other die alone, that is to say, to be answerable for the life of the other or else risk becoming the accomplice of that death (1998B, 148).

To put a form of resistance to the desire for murder into the ‘play’ of economic relations, brought in from the opening [*la porte*] of ethical signification, is to recognize with

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<sup>41</sup> “The Heideggerian deduction of the ecstasis of time on the basis of being-to-death ... is speculatively more satisfying than any image of a river [the metaphor for the Husserlian flow of time-consciousness] ... But are we compelled to start from the image of a flux or flowing ... ? Can the nonrest of time, that by which time contrasts with the identity of the Same, signify otherwise than ... the continuous mobility that the privileged metaphor of the flux suggests? ... To put it more differently, do the nonrest or the disquiet of time not signify ... a disquieting of the Same by the Other[?]” (Levinas, 2000, 109).

<sup>42</sup> Here I am altering the language of ‘survival’ as a biological, individual endeavor to the language of the survivor, with its worldly and ethical implications post-Holocaust. This is to explain why Levinas says, “giving meaning to the other and to the world which, without me, still counts for me, and for which I am answerable (the great dissolution, in dying, of relationships with everyone else, as stated by Heidegger in Section 50 of *Sein und Zeit* notwithstanding) is certainly not survival” (1998B, 228).

<sup>43</sup> Levinas uses this term to indicate the content of what he calls tracework. See, “The Trace of the Other,” especially where he admits, “we are tempted to say *engraving* itself” (1986, 359).

patience<sup>44</sup> the injunction to listen for what is beyond the self-same, beyond Being. Levinas argues that *intelligibility* must always imply *ethics*, and, rather than defend the self-same, we are required to “speak instead of the *taking upon oneself of the fate of the other*” (1998B, 103 [emphasis added]).<sup>45</sup>

More than once, Levinas had argued for an idea of *uprightness* to convey a significance stronger-than-death (1986, 356 and 1998B, 148). Uprightness is an alternative that both allows for the withdrawal of death’s grip from the meaningfulness of time and moves *beyond* the nothingness of death and the threat of non-existence in relation to Being.<sup>46</sup> With this demand for uprightness, he couples it with the call for ethical substitution against the economic significations of reciprocity and exchange. Levinas’ demand of “one for the other,” in which carrying a responsibility for the mortality of others becomes the greatest task for me – so great that it is a debt that is also uniquely all mine – becomes the frame for a resistance to a legacy of ontological escapism, for “precisely no one may replace me” (2000, 193).

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#### IV. Conclusion

Dis-inter-estedness of a responsibility for the other and for his *past* – a past immemorial for me – on the basis of the *future* of prophesy ... this is the temporality in which the plot of being and ontology are unraveled in ethics (Levinas 1998B, 153).

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<sup>44</sup> Levinas discusses the importance of patience in resistance to Heidegger’s ontology of anticipatory Dasein, “Patience swallows its own intention” (2000, 139).

<sup>45</sup> Here, we take serious the caution by Levinas of the ‘overuse’ of the term ‘love.’ Here, we follow his description of love (the more ‘ethical aspect’ than the passionate aspect) – love as voluptuousness and fecundity (see 1969, 265-269). Although, Levinas does agree that “Love is originary” (1998B, 108).

<sup>46</sup> This problem of Being and Nothingness is discussed at length by Levinas following Bergson, (2000, 68-78).

I would argue that there is enough evidence in Levinas' work to hope for a form of appropriate response to the legacy of Auschwitz that is also ethically motivated, and that this could be brought into the fabric of the world. Perhaps we can begin this work by asking: How do we attend to and carry the otherness of others? Other persons? Other generations? *Do we genuinely take account for what is other than that which appears in the present tense or may perhaps be futurally interesting?*

With the demand for uprightness, in the work of ethical substitution, we can begin to find a response to Auschwitz. "Human freedom is essentially unheroic" (1998A, 16). The distance between the present and an 'immemorial' past *of which I am still responsible*, is the ethical injunction beyond the exercise of knowledge-generation. The separation between one generation and another is made *radical* by Levinas so that any analogy to or analysis of existence may remain ethical, as a respect for the other as Other.

The eschatological, as the "beyond" of history, draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses in them and calls them forth to their full responsibility (1969, 23).

In exigency, with urgency, my relation to the mortality of others is significant in way that is "more ancient than [every] exhibition" (2000, 218).

The disquiet of the other's passing awakens the slumber of a world that, in its own interest, refuses to find itself immediately responsible – neither to the mortality of all others nor to the radical otherness that belongs to an immemorial past: "consciousness descends from insomnia ... self-consciousness ... is fundamentally the forgetting of the Other, ... even if the freedom of Same is still only a waking dream" (2000, 210). Levinas dismantles ontology so that the meaning of the passing of time can no longer, in good conscience, find its ground in the ecstasy of existential projection: a movement of Being-

toward-death which is fundamentally mine. The ontological interpretation of time selectively forgets the *an-archy* of alterity which haunts every one of its conquests over existence.

The face that confronts me and the trace of a past that I am responsible for contains a gravity that cannot be erased. The sincere affectivity of death – in which the death of another is truly a scandal – “visits me,” is a disruption in the temporal course of Being, and it initiates a necessity, an urgency for tracework. The trace is the audible silence written into the world in which the vulnerable, mortal other has passed, “The trace qua trace does not simply lead to the past, but is the very passing toward a past more remote than any past or future” (1986, 358). In this way, the degrees of proximity between oneself and others (including **inter-generational proximity**) becomes the marker and measure of lived time still founded upon an *immemorial past*.<sup>47</sup> The face-to-face with the others of an immemorial past describes a gravity that the ‘I’ cannot avoid, imagine or efface. As it is, as ‘I’ survive others who have passed, there will also be others who will survive “me.” The degree of responsibility to the other is only greater with the demand for tracework, since to “be good is a deficit” (Levinas 2000, 223).<sup>48</sup>

If there is to be any intimate responsibility for alterity and a sincere, subjective affectivity when the face of the other no longer responds, in effect there must be ways to resist those metaphors and interests that disperse the responsibility for the other, especially those who have passed *without return*. Facing the death of another is not

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<sup>47</sup> For the immemorial past, there is no remediation. It therefore cannot be recovered nor, by definition, remembered. Levinas refers to the paradox of the immemorial past, “The signifyingness of the trace places us in a lateral relationship, unconvertible into rightness (something inconceivable in the order of disclosure and being), answering to an irreversible past. No memory could follow the traces of this past. It is an immemorial past” (1986, 355).

<sup>48</sup> He continues that since goodness as a deficit, it also “is withering and stupidity within being; but it is an excellence and elevation beyond being” (2000, 223-224).

merely to associate it with my own death as Heidegger had formulated it. In this same vein, Levinas demands that our work here be generous, also *without return*, (without egoic intentionality and desire for reciprocity).<sup>49</sup> Presently, our treatment of the legacy of Auschwitz continues to respond indifferently, unable to resist the dehumanization imbedded in this legacy. This legacy will continue to remain unquestioned as long as systematic violence is not ethically addressed and goes without genuine resistance. The viability and survivability of an ethos that does not efface humanity, in the wake of this legacy sedimented in the workings of the modern world, must carry the burden of a *work that is upright and generous*. The non-economic, asymmetrical movement of ethical investment – in which the “I” does not return, but merely passes on meaning through generations, intergenerationally or diagenationally – is to resist the violence embedded in this legacy.

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<sup>49</sup> Levinas notes that there is both violence and injustice in the “work sought for its recompense in the immediacy of its triumph ... impatiently awaited ... The one-way movement [of departure without return] would be inverted into a reciprocity ... absorbed ... in calculations.” He asks instead about a work that is neither a game nor a thoughtless calculation, but that considers the world for a time that is *not mine, not for me*, “an eschatology without hope for oneself, an eschatology of liberation from my own time” (1986, 349). **Is it possible to have a relationship that is meaningful and nonviolent with a world to which *I will not return*?**

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