

## LEVINAS AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM AFTER AUSCHWITZ

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*An ethics of disinterested goodness governs the testimony of Auschwitz survivors Primo Levi and Jean Amery. For Emmanuel Levinas, ethical goodness such as we find in Levi's and Amery's disinterested testimony to the German people leaves the only possible trace of the divine. Levinas proceeds to dismiss mysticism as an interested, self-serving, a-ethical search for God. The article proposes that Christian mysticism can embody Levinas's ethics of disinterestedness if it is understood as an analogizing ethical grasp of the divine.*

EMMANUEL LEVINAS DEDICATED HIS ETHICS “to the memory of those who were closest [to him] among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, [of] the same anti-semitism.”<sup>1</sup> What religious reality can one oppose to Auschwitz? What response can religion give? We stand before the afflicted filled with pity and awe; pity for their suffering, their loneliness, and their fate, and awe for those like Jean Amery and Primo Levi who paid with their lives for their implacable search for truth and their resolute morality.

According to Jean Amery, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel, religion with its precepts of forgiveness and compassion for persecutors, and society with its compromises, teach us to lie, teach us to forgive and forget.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981) v.

<sup>2</sup> See Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1977) 64–81; Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Abacus, 1989) 109–11; and Elie Wiesel, *Night* (London: Robson, 1974) 75, and *The Accident* (London: Robson, 1974) 316–18

But biological time, psychological health, and social survival are not moral categories.<sup>3</sup> For victims “to internalize [their] past suffering and bear it in emotional asceticism” is to become an accomplice of one’s torturers.<sup>4</sup> Morality requires of the victim and persecutor the “externalization and actualization” of their conflict.<sup>5</sup> By so doing the victim is rescued from the pitiless “loneliness” of the unlistened-to story and the oppressor transformed from anti-man to fellow human being.<sup>6</sup>

Levinas captures the exact moral transfer from internalization to externalization in his ethical philosophy. What Amery calls internalization, Levinas calls interiority, and what Amery calls externalization, Levinas calls exteriority. Levinas believes that we can find an authentic trace of God only in the moral passage from interiority to exteriority.

The subtitle of Levinas’s first major work, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*,<sup>7</sup> attests to the radical exteriority of his enterprise. The book denounces the totalitarian intent of some totalizing systems, such as we find in the traditional Augustinian, Leibnizian, and Hegelian theodicies,<sup>8</sup> and affirms the otherness of infinity. Exteriority is so absolute that Levinas rejects all forms of internalization, whether internalization takes the form either of the evangelical call to forgive one’s enemy or of the interior journey to God in prayer. According to Levinas, internalization/interiority is a submoral and sterile exercise in self-absorption and the endless repetition of the same. He believes that it is possible to know God only as a moral trace in the stranger, “the widow and the orphan,” the other as other.

Levinas maintains that the interior journey to God is a deadening form of self-absorption, that religious interiority cultivates self-preoccupation. Real otherness is radical exteriority. Christian mysticism’s interiority belongs to a philosophy of intentionality that is necessarily idealist, solipsist, amoral. Mysticism’s experiential representation of God assimilates God to the self and denies God’s otherness. Levinas rejects the interior journey in favor of ethics. Approach to God can only be ethical, can only be “outside of any mysticism,”<sup>9</sup> for mysticism is a by-product of

<sup>3</sup> Amery, *At the Mind’s Limits* 72.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 69.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 27–29, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> For Jewish antitheodicy after Auschwitz, see Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1998). For a contemporary Christian response to theodicy, see Paul Ricoeur, “Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985) 635–48.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1981) 115.

autoaffection, natural benevolence, divine instinct, and fusional longing. The glory of the Infinite “does not belong to the language of contemplation”<sup>10</sup> but to morality. The Infinite is recognized in moral action, not in contemplation and mystical experience.

In the first section of this article, I show how Levinas’s understanding of disinterested goodness, as the summons to responsibility for the afflicted and afflicting neighbor, can ground ethics after Auschwitz. In the second section, I present Levinas’s version of the perennial critique of mysticism as a self-absorbed interior journey. In its place he conducts a philosophical search for an ethical trace of God in suffering. God and morality after Auschwitz is my concern in these first two sections. I focus Levinas’s general search for a trace of God in suffering in a way that Levinas does not: on Auschwitz and the testimony of two survivors, Primo Levi and Jean Amery. In the third section, I examine the strands of the Christian mystical traditions to which I think Levinas comes closest, and which, I think, are most likely to profit from my Levinasian reflections on Auschwitz. In the fourth and final section, I present a constructive Levinasian-style reflection on Christian mysticism after Auschwitz. I adopt Levinas’s claim that responsibility for the other belongs to the primordial self to conclude that faith tied to love can be a mode of forgetting—forgiving and forgetting—if not tied to morality. Infinite Goodness is known in the exercise of disinterested responsibility. As a “one-for-the-other,” the self leaves a trace—an *analogia moralis*—of the Infinite Other.

### DISINTERESTED GOODNESS

Instead of naming or describing God, ethics summons the self. The summoned self discovers itself as already responsible for the neighbor. The self is an “ethical one-for-the-other.”<sup>11</sup> Levinas finds in the ethical “jolt”<sup>12</sup> of responsibility of the one-for-the-other, a trace of God.

Levinas believes that the self, left to itself, is incapable of becoming responsible for the afflicted. The self belongs, he says, to Cartesian time where the self can constitute itself as an “I think” existing for and in itself. The afflicted other must break in, but cannot using a time that would allow the self to constitute itself in an endless monologue. Presence or even the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) 153–174, at 172. Michael Morgan says that for Levinas, “the language of God and the divine image are not about God and His image; they express the sense of value, significance, and worth others have for us” (*Discovering Levinas* [New York: Cambridge University, 2007] 182).

<sup>12</sup> Levinas, “God and Philosophy” 166.

recollection of the past arrives too late to be useful to the afflicted. Amery and Levi believe that time which heals the wounds, time in which to forgive and forget, is a submoral category. Amery and Levi are not looking for a dialogue. They are issuing a summons in which the self will discover—in Levinas's words—that its immemorial rights have already been made over to the neighbor. The immemorial rights of the self have been irrevocably assigned to another, and that assignment makes the self an ethical being. The summons undercuts the self's right to survival and all that survival entails, and that society intends to defend with submoral compromises, captured in the phrase "forgive and forget."

Responsibility endows the self with its original identity, but not as a subject self. Levinas marks the linguistic shift: being primordially made over to the other, the ethical self is grammatically in the accusative. Faced with the other, the self answers in the accusative: "Here I am!" Responsibility for another precedes freedom, and the summons to ethical identity itself creates it. No one can be substituted for the self. Unable to escape the face of the neighbor, the ethical self is pledged to the other and cannot take back the pledge.

What Levinas has in mind, and what Levi and Amery are describing, can be captured in our daily reaction to the appeal from derogated people. For example, my instant reaction to homeless people might be to turn away, hide my eyes, and explain away the assignation and justify my indifference in terms of the deserved consequence of drug and alcohol abuse, of sloth, or mental illness, as someone else's problem—the state's—and so forth. However, my silencing of the afflicted, my refusal to give them voice, can disturb my usual moral world and the self's habitual self-absorption within its own economy. This disturbance can force the self, however surreptitiously, to enter the unwonted, the unusual.

Disbelief greeted the first reports of Auschwitz to reach the world outside the camps. The immediate reaction was to dismiss the silent cry issuing from Auschwitz as alien and therefore as unbelievable. There is a truth in this reaction. Something happened that is outside the self's known, predictable, and controllable world. The silent cry is an "otherwise than being"<sup>13</sup>—the title of Levinas's second major work. The cry is exterior to the wonted world, "otherwise than" the self's habitual controlling, manipulative presence to whatever presents itself. It challenges our sense of mastery and community. The other's silent cry acts as an awakening, summoning the self in spite of itself, its certainties, its theories, ideologies, and sense of justice.

The other, in the person of the inmates of Auschwitz, comes close and disturbs with a moral charge that falls upon the self. The silent cry calls the

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 168.

self to pure ethical passivity, which is outside my habitual world and otherwise than my usual appropriated responsibilities, outside what Levinas calls my customary presence to being and my officious self. The assignation is my responsibility in spite of myself. It is the same responsibility that held Levi and Amery as ethical hostages. The assignation is the same humanity's indifference and inhumanity that obsessed and shamed Levi to the point that he answered for persecuting humanity even to the point of "shame of the world"—shame at humanity's inhumanity—and gnawing remorse.

Levi says that shame, complex remorse and shame, made the inmates of Auschwitz accomplices in their own extinction. Shame, along with hunger, beatings and fear, drowned the inmates. Levi wishes to be clear. This shame is not for some evil that the inmates worked against another. It is the shame of the just man. The Germans, he says, never knew this shame, nor did those who dwelt in the gray zone of moral ambiguity. The just felt remorse when confronted by this crime committed by the Germans. They felt shame for the world, shame that the evil of the Holocaust had been "irrevocably introduced into the world."<sup>14</sup> In the act of erasing the inmates, this shame testifies to elementary human morality, which Levi calls "the shame of the world."<sup>15</sup> Though the fundamental goodness of humanity is hidden in the shame for humanity's inhumanity, he concedes that his moral strength could not sustain this belief; his survival was due to luck. The inmates drown in innocent shame. After their moral suicide, physical death has no meaning.

The innocent but self-destructive shame of the world acts like any moral injunction. According to Levinas, a moral injunction is "an-arche," for it is prior to an "arche," prior to any beginning. Prior to the social and the individual search for survival stands the awesome and pitiable figure of the stranger. Being assigned by the stranger is not to be considered the other side of any activity. The assignation is responsibility justified by no prior commitment. No hidden freedom, maintained within passivity summoned to responsibility, can take charge. The self is summoned beyond care for itself into the ethical.

But that is not all, nor is it even the core of the revelation hidden in the assignation. Levinas states that the other is not simply an "Otherwise Than Being," a "Beyond Essence," that obsesses and persecutes, that substitutes the other for the I. The neighbor is not only the one who bears the suffering but is also the one who inflicts the suffering. The torturer converts the afflicted self into a "hostage."<sup>16</sup> Responsibility for the persecutor will involve a rethinking of the identity of the neighbor in terms of Levi's and Amery's obsessive obligation to the German people. Amery says, "If you

<sup>14</sup> Levi, *Drowned* 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

<sup>16</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 112.

wish, I bear my grudge for reasons of personal salvation. Certainly. On the other hand, however, it is also for the good of the German people.”<sup>17</sup> Levi says the same: “I do not believe that man’s life necessarily has a definite purpose; but if I think of my life and the aims I have until now set for myself, I recognize only one of them as well defined and conscious, and it is precisely this, to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people.”<sup>18</sup> As victims, Levi and Amery hold us hostage. Yet, ironically, in their lives as Levi and Amery recall them for us, morality made them responsible for, even obsessed by—to the point of death—the moral fate of their German oppressors. Levinas captures their responsibility with the astonishing claim that “the word *I* means *here I am* answering for everything and for everyone.”<sup>19</sup>

Levinas calls moral responsibility “obsession.”<sup>20</sup> Levi and Amery were obsessed by responsibility for the German people—hence Levinas’s scandalous claim that obsession is complete or absolute when the persecuted are ethically liable for their persecutor. Levinas captures Amery’s and Levi’s moral fate at the hands of their torturers: “The face of the neighbor in its persecuting hatred can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful.”<sup>21</sup> Answering for the persecutor, responsibility for the neighbor as enemy reveals the agonistic depth of their responsibility. Levinas explains that one can endure the “absolute patience” of being responsible for one’s persecutors only if absolute patience is moral patience.<sup>22</sup>

Amery’s and Levi’s moral patience consists in working for the transformation of their torturers, the anti-man, into fellow human beings. Fellowship is fellowship in suffering. Transformation requires that their torturers acknowledge the victim’s suffering and desire for the rest of their lives that “the irreversible” past “be reversible.”<sup>23</sup> For Amery and Levi morality is the torturers’ transformation.

Levinas’s description is full of anguish on account of the persecuting hatred. Nonetheless, he will explain responsibility in terms of disinterestedness. Responsibility is not something added to the subjectivity of the subject and his or her vulnerability. Responsibility for one’s persecutor is subjectivity itself. The subject’s responsibility is other than interested, otherwise than essence. Levinas claims that the subject is disinterested. He believes that responsibility is disinterested when neither egoism nor altruism is presupposed or involved in any way. Before the self has the opportunity to make an egoistic or an altruistic choice, the self is already possessed by responsibility for the other. In the “prehistory” of

<sup>17</sup> Amery, *Mind’s Limit* 80.

<sup>18</sup> Levi, *Drowned* 143.

<sup>19</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 114.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 111.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

the ego,"<sup>24</sup> the self is already responsible for the other with a responsibility that is older than the ego and anterior to principles. The anarchic self is the disinterested self. Prior to dialogue, the disinterested self is totally exposed to ethical responsibility. To be disinterested is to be as we were created, as "the other in the same."<sup>25</sup> Levinas concludes that responsibility for everyone goes to the point of "substitution."<sup>26</sup> The self is held hostage. The "absolute outside-of-me," the other, concerns the self: I am my brother's and my sister's keeper.<sup>27</sup>

Levinas by calling the self to remorse and responsibility is not trying to lead us back into the world of superego guilt or vengeance. The for-the-other characteristic of the subject is a specifically ethical journey divesting the ego. Preoccupation with the other is not to be confused with the ego troubled by a guilt complex. Such guilt is one of the main engines of religion. Nietzsche, by following his genealogical method, traces guilt back to the shadowy world of anger and vengeance. Amery and Levi establish the moral aim and rationality of their resentment. Again a guilt complex can be subsumed under a Freudian superego. The superego transmits the inherited wisdom of generational precept and obligation and ensures their covert efficacy. The generations establish an archaic beginning, but Levinas's self is a hostage to the other and is aware of it because of the anarchic experience of ethics.<sup>28</sup> Heideggerian resoluteness allows us to make a stand. But for Amery, Levi, and Levinas alike, remorse and resentment antecede the self-possessed self with its Heideggerian project. Amery and Levi found themselves ineluctably incarcerated and tortured. There, summoned by the other, even the enemy other, the Levinasian self has never had the time or presence in which to assume its own resolute (Heideggerian) possibilities. Heideggerian resoluteness presupposes freedom. A guilt complex, bad conscience, the superego, also presuppose that the self was initially free, even if only in an ancestral or mythological past. In Auschwitz, Amery and Levi found themselves already ineluctably bound, their life morally forfeit to their torturers. As a result they discovered themselves as divested ethical selves.

In contrast to Nietzsche, Freud, or Heidegger, one might imagine that Levinas had reduced the ego and its identity to the act of substituting itself. But as "an otherwise than being," the self cannot be explained even in a minimalist way. According to Levinas, the defection of the identity of the ego precedes every event undergone or conducted by a subject. The ego and identity are undone to the limit, not so that they might be remade in

<sup>24</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 117.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 111–12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 117.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 196 n. 20.



the other. Rather, their uniqueness consists in being irreplaceably made over. A hostage always has one more degree of responsibility. Taking moral responsibility for the faults of one's persecutors is to suffer absolutely. Amery and Levi nourished their ethical suffering, even to death, in the intransigence of their testimony and in the crucible of their unlistened-to witness to the German people.

Responsibility for the other is the impossibility to come back and concern oneself only with oneself.<sup>29</sup> Levinas calls such responsibility passivity. Passivity, as the force of an alterity in the self, is not the alienation of an identity betrayed but a substitution of the self for the other. Substitution is not alienation, for the self is anarchically called to be a moral self. The self is summoned as someone irreplaceable. "I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired."<sup>30</sup> Moral inspiration is the psyche. The psyche, for Levinas, signifies alterity without alienation in the form of incarnation. By incarnation Levinas means, agnostically, that the persecutor is "being-in-one's-skin, having-the-other-in-one's-skin."<sup>31</sup> Though not morally alienating, Amery and Levi, tortured by the anti-man at Auschwitz, endured the physical suffering<sup>32</sup> of "having-the-other-in-one's-skin."<sup>33</sup> In their Auschwitz testimony they present us with the awesome spectacle in which "Goodness invests"<sup>34</sup> them with moral responsibility through an excess of suffering leading to "an alteration of essence."<sup>35</sup> Here the self is expelled from itself outside itself. Levinas calls expulsion substitution for the other.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 114. To determine the status of the divested subject is not easy. Levinas is well aware that the other, my neighbor, "is also a third party with respect to another" (ibid. 128). The resulting objective view gives birth to "thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy" (ibid.). To this extent the self's responsibility to all can and must limit itself and "concern itself also with itself" (ibid.). However, Levinas's well-founded fear is that the "unlimited initial responsibility, which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself, and for philosophy can be forgotten." Forgetting gives rise to "pure egoism" (ibid.). The type of freedom appropriate to unlimited responsibility is not the experience of running up against another freedom which limits mine. Primary freedom is an infinite responsibility where the other accuses "to the point of persecution, because the other, absolutely other, is another one (*autrui*)" (ibid.). The will cannot assume such passivity. Levi's will was traumatized by being responsible for its persecutor and exalted and elevated by the revelation of value and "in the literal sense of the term" inspired (ibid. 124). "Inspiration, heteronomy, is the *pneuma* of the psyche" (ibid. 124), says Levinas. "Freedom is borne by the responsibility it could not shoulder, an elevation and inspiration without complacency" (ibid.).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 115.

<sup>32</sup> Amery, *Mind's Limits* 21–40.

<sup>33</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 115.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 110.



Levinas's ethical philosophy allows us to measure Amery's and Levi's moral goodness. Their responsibility for everyone leads to substitution. They are hostages. Their stand, their "here I am," answers for everyone. Engaged, they live on the other side whence it is morally impossible to return to worry only about oneself. Hence Levinas can draw from substitution the shocking conclusion that substitution is a transference "from the outrage inflicted by the other to the expiation for his fault by me."<sup>36</sup> Since the ego is not an entity capable of expiating for others—that would be magic or a religious atonement, which Amery and Levi dismiss—expiation can only mean an ineluctable being-for-the-other. Here their agonistic incarnation is revealed as disinterested goodness, and their moral intransigence to the point of obsession as anarchic substitution.

### AN ETHICAL TRACE OF GOD

Levinas discovers a trace of God in disinterested goodness. Levinas claims that an ethical theophany must not be confused with a religious experience. Ethical experience is prior to religious experience because the latter involves the intentional, active self. The ethical experience is "prior to emotions or voices, prior to 'religious experience.'"<sup>37</sup> Religious experience can only disclose a god that belongs to the self's own economy. That is why, on the interior journey, the danger is for the self to form a god in its own image and likeness. On the exterior journey, traces of God are ethical. The afflicted neighbor is "a master of justice," a teacher from Sinai, elevated and exterior, teaching not, as with Plato, to awaken reminiscence.<sup>38</sup> Exteriority has made interiority sterile. Reminiscence is futile. The Neoplatonic Christian project of finding God in an interior journey above memory, but through memory, is a false lead. There is no vision of divine forms, no hearing of voices. The interior journey is a dead end and mysticism an illusion.

Anarchic responsibility unites identity and alterity so that the ego's uniqueness and unity depends on the ethical hold the neighbor exerts. Insofar as the self abandons itself and becomes a substitute, the other's hold on the self makes the self good. Now, for Levinas, goodness is a singular attribute. It is not the property of the self, does not reveal itself to the self. It invests the self in obedience to the hidden Good. Levinas means that insofar as the ego does not share with all other beings its will to survive and thrive but is responsible for its persecutors, the self is invested with goodness. Investiture is a trace of the Good.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 168.

<sup>38</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992) 338.

There is, then, room for neither natural benevolence nor divine instinct. Insofar as the ethical relation of ineluctable, never chosen, responsibility for the other is disinterested, it is a possible—the only possible—identifiable location of the divine trace. For Amery and Levi disinterestedness is a sort of ethical wound in the self that cannot heal over. It only grows with their growing awareness of suffering and affliction. Levi feels the shame of the world that drowned the inmates at Auschwitz, and more distressing still, along with Amery he feels the depths of the wound in his assumption of responsibility for his persecutors. These witnesses are subjected to the afflicted and elevated in disinterested subjection. Disinterestedness manifests their allegiance to the Good.

“There is,” says Levinas, in the believer, “an anarchic trace of God in passivity.”<sup>39</sup> Levinas is not claiming that we can use this passivity as a trace to prove the existence of God. The contrary is the case. When we understand who God is for Levinas, we realize why he does not try to offer philosophical or rational proofs for God’s existence.

What then is Levinas claiming? How does the trace of nonchosen responsibility in passivity show who God is? For Levinas, God is, perhaps, nothing but a “permanent refusal of a history which would come to terms with our private tears.”<sup>40</sup> The mark of the ethical is precisely the disinterested refusal by our witnesses to “come to terms” with the evil suffered by the afflicted at Auschwitz. Coming to terms can be theoretical, as in theodicies and ideologies, or practical as in rationalizations denigrating and silencing the victims by, for example, forgiving and forgetting. But the witnesses’ refusal to make peace with the suffering of the afflicted does not mean that they meet God. Quite the contrary. The silent cry of the afflicted holds our witnesses responsible for the plight of the afflicted. Before the witnesses have an opportunity to make an ethical choice, the silent cry “exploded” upon them. The resulting explosion reveals that the witnesses are already responsible for the afflicted. The cry has the power of a trauma because the witnesses are already held down by their responsibility and can never come out from under its weight. They are permanently ethically traumatized. Their ethical selfhood is “here I am” ready to obey.

Levinas calls this antecedent responsibility “the absolute-one-for-the-other.”<sup>41</sup> Antecedent responsibility is absolute in two senses. First, the witnesses’ being “one-for-the-other” is “absolute” in the sense that the witnesses cannot take refuge in deliberation and freedom of choice. Their passivity, as disinterested goodness, antedates their freedom to choose.

<sup>39</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 196 n. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University 1990) 20.

<sup>41</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 165.

Ethical freedom arrived too late. The ethically Good “chooses me before I welcome it.”<sup>42</sup> The nonchosen, even nonchooseable demand of responsibility, with which the afflicted burden the witnesses, leaves no space for deliberation.

Second, the feeling of responsibility for the afflicted cannot be relieved, cannot be satisfied with good deeds. The self is never quit of responsibility. Levi’s and Amery’s shame and guilt were relieved only by being increased. Their responsibility has an insatiable, even limitless, quality. The unquenchable thirst of the demand by the other reveals an unlimited ethical exigency. I can never claim to have exhausted my responsibility. The unlimited ethical exigency, as a form of the unlimited, opens up the delimited to manifest the Infinite. Only the insatiable, unlimited moral demand reveals transcendence, infinity, and holiness hidden in the unvoiced cries of the afflicted. Levinas concludes that the infinite exigency is a trace, showing that the cries of the afflicted have been “already addressed to God.”<sup>43</sup> In as much as the Good is disinterested, it has already heard the cry.

This intimation of ethical infinity does not lead in the direction of knowledge of the infinite. On the contrary, this intimation points in the direction of action. One might imagine that Levi’s shame was a private experience hidden in his interiority. It turns out to be only superficially secret. The interior seeming is deceptive. The disinterestedness of infinite goodness is revealed to Levi and Amery only in action. The essence of disinterested goodness is known only in the very public “here I am” of their writings.

Even if, with Levinas, one believes that God is Disinterested Goodness, it does not follow that one knows God. The call of the Good leads to action. As disinterested, the Good declines the attention it arouses and inclines toward responsibility. The absolute passivity implied by disinterested goodness is a passivity, a suffering, known to Amery and Levi in the trace of the victims of the Holocaust. Their knowledge does not reveal God but awakens the ethical impulse to responsibility for the other. “In its goodness,” says Levinas, “the Good declines the desire it arouses while inclining it toward responsibility for the neighbor.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, even for a believer like Levinas, the Good does not lead to knowledge of God. God always withdraws to preserve the “difference in the non-indifference of the Good, which chooses me before I welcome it.”<sup>45</sup> “Non-indifference” is the traumatic responsibility intrinsic to disinterestedness. The Good preserves its selfhood, its “difference,” its goodness as

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, *God and Philosophy* 167.

<sup>44</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 123.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 123.

disinterested, by letting itself be excluded from the analysis except for the trace of responsibility.<sup>46</sup> If Goodness were included, it would become the center of attention. It would no longer be disinterested. The withdrawal of the Good reveals the disinterested essence of goodness. The trace of nonindifference is revealed in the self's being already called into action by the traumatic blow delivered by the silent cry of the destitute of Auschwitz, and "obsessed" even to death in the shame of the world. Levinas concludes that since obsession is irreducible to consciousness, talk of God must be indirect, at most "a trace of the *who knows where*."<sup>47</sup> As Obsession overwhelms and betrays consciousness, so God can be known only "as something foreign, a disequilibrium, a delirium."<sup>48</sup>

Amery's and Levi's testimonies offer no magical redemption in which the self could freely choose to suffer for others and assume their responsibility. Levinas cautions us that suffering for others "is not a purifying fire of suffering, which magically would count."<sup>49</sup> Suffering cannot count, because the pity cannot be freely assumed for-the-other. The self was not first free and then, after deliberation, freely chose to assume the suffering. It is the absolutely accusative character of the ethical self, not freedom to choose, that makes disinterested suffering possible. Levi's and Amery's pain is, in Levinas's sense, "for nothing."<sup>50</sup> They believed that their witness to the German people had gone unheeded, and as a result, they considered their witness a failure. Disinterested suffering excludes magic.

The witnesses to disinterested goodness make room for the existence of God, but they do not offer a proof for God's existence. Levi and Amery remain atheists. Pity for the afflicted, as disinterested, is prior to freely chosen pity. Pity is a gift. That is why in the antecedent, nonchosen gift of pity, Levinas, the believer, sees a space for saying that he can catch sight of a pity for suffering that has antecedently gifted the witnesses with pity for those who suffer. Levinas says that in suffering he glimpses a God who suffers for what is pitiable in suffering. Levinas identifies a suffering because of what is pitiful in the suffering of the afflicted. In the space cleared by disinterested pity, he glimpses a God, who, as Disinterested Goodness, leaves a trace in the witnesses' writings of a Goodness that has deflected attention from itself into action. Goodness has already withdrawn to preserve its disinterestedness as the "difference" of its "non-indifference." Withdrawal is the mark of infinite responsibility.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Morgan calls the trace a "divine absence" which gives an ethical force to the afflicted other. He concludes that this force "cannot come from the other, who is just another person like me" (*Discovering Levinas* 193–94.)

<sup>47</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 100.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 196 n. 21.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

### THE INTERIOR JOURNEY TO GOD

Many Christian mystical traditions have recognized that it is impossible to construct the dialectic of self and God as other than self in a unilateral manner. Their belief raises a serious question, even doubt, concerning Levinas's critique of the interior journey to God and of Amery's, Levi's, and Wiesel's claim that the evangelical precept teaches the victims "to internalize" their "past suffering and to bear it in emotional asceticism."<sup>51</sup> Levinas dismissed the interior journey to God for deriving God as a sort of alter ego from the ego. Levinas's critique hits home in the case of pantheist, monist, and fusional mysticism, but these have never been dominant traditions in the Christian West.

The Christian mystical traditions teach that the interior transcendental journey to God is not possible unless we progressively divest ourselves of the normal every-day religious approach to God found in oral prayers of petition arising from human needs of every kind. That is why in Christian mysticism the so-called methods of prayer are methods of disposing oneself to listen to God. The many methods build on one another. Learning to pray begins with prayers of petition, with asking God to confer some benefit. According to the traditions, oral prayer usually gives way to the discursive prayer of meditation. There are numerous kinds of meditative prayer, but all have as a common aim to learn the art of listening beyond prayers of vital need. Whatever the meditative method employed, two characteristic stages of growth are universally acknowledged. First, the mind is concentrated on the subject under consideration. Second, in the course of time mental prayer grows more inward, and the mind descends into the "heart."<sup>52</sup> The experience is paradoxical, for the mind seems to do less. The prayer is less and less discursive and more and more listening and attending to the heart. Stillness is the rule of inward listening. When the mind is stilled, the mind can listen to the one voice speaking to the heart. Practitioners experience God drawing the mind to truth, the will to freedom, and the heart to love.

On the inward journey, the prayer traditions made an important discovery concerning the paradoxical character of God's mode of givenness. Prayers arise out of, and cultivate, various feelings. These feelings begin with vital feelings such as well-being and uneasiness. Ricoeur calls these feelings formless feelings. Inasmuch as vital feelings give rise to certain levels of activity, they take various shapes as in the search for security, protection, etc. These are the feelings Levinas identifies. As I have already noted, they correspond at the level of religious consciousness to prayers of

<sup>51</sup> Amery, *Mind's Limits* 69.

<sup>52</sup> Kallistos Ware, "The Power of the Name: The Function of the Jesus Prayer," *Cross Currents* 24 (1974) 184-203, at 195-97.

petition. Feelings of happiness and openness to being are likewise formless. Ricoeur says that they can be schematized as friendship, devotion to ideas and so forth. In the religious consciousness they give rise to the prayer of the mind which in time becomes the prayer of the mind in the heart. Since God is beyond essence, Ricoeur concludes that “it is understandable that the feelings which most radically interiorize the supreme intention of reason” and the search for true happiness “might themselves be beyond form.”<sup>53</sup> The formlessness of these feelings places them on the same trajectory as esthetic experience but further along.

Here prayer is an attentive listening to God with the mind in the heart. The illusory quality of such prayer derives in part from the fact that practitioners feel they are doing nothing, in part because it is formless and in part because this prayer is a felt experience without a prior tangible object for cause. No other experience comes without a tangible cause. Only the prayer of the mind in the heart has no tangible cause. Yet practitioners say that God “stilled” them. They say God “touched” them: “I felt God’s presence,” “God spoke to me,” and so forth. What do they mean? Our positivist culture dismisses their claim as unreal and gives various significant, deconstructive psychological interpretations. Where could God touch them? How can they contact someone who is not sensible or imaginable? Sensation and imagination are the only two ways in which human intentionality can make contact with reality. What part of them can God move?

The tradition that the absolute dwells in the innermost self has been handed down in a Neoplatonic Christian guise first formulated for the Christian West in the late fourth century. For example, Augustine says: “Yet all the time You [God] were more inward than the most inward place of my heart and loftier than the highest.”<sup>54</sup> Augustine concludes his exhaustive search for God in vital living and in memory with the same confession: “In what place then did I find You to learn of You? For You were not in memory, before I learned of You. Where then did I find You to learn of You, save in Yourself, above myself?”<sup>55</sup> Augustine seems to open out an eternal space within his heart and above his memory. This is paradoxical because, although God is above memory, Augustine could not search for God if he did not hold in his memory knowledge of the God for whom he searches. God dwells in memory as the unconditioned, who will admit of no objective determinations. As the object of the search for true happiness, God is simply demanded by the understanding. As the true

<sup>53</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965) 160.

<sup>54</sup> “Tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo” (Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6). All translations of the *Confessions* are from *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. F. J. Sheed (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944).

<sup>55</sup> *Confessions* 10.26.

happiness for which Augustine seeks, God is revealed as more intimate to Augustine than Augustine is to himself.

According to the prayer traditions, the profoundest of the formless feelings belong to the heart and share in the heart's dialectic. Thereby the tradition reveals the ontological depths from which the schemata for God arise and which they intend. Ricoeur says that the heart's finitude experiences awe as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*:

If being is that which beings are not, anguish is the feeling "par excellence" of ontological difference [*mysterium tremendum*]. But joy attests that we have a part of us linked to this very lack of being in beings [*mysterium fascinans*]. That is why the Spiritual Joy [Descartes], the Intellectual Love [Spinoza] and the Beatitude [Bergson] . . . designate, under different names and on different philosophical contents the only affective "mood" worthy of being called ontological.<sup>56</sup>

Augustine exclaims: "Let me see Your face even if I die, lest I die with longing to see it."<sup>57</sup> God can "still," "touch," "be a felt presence," "speak to" the nonvital desires: the desire for truth and goodness as true happiness.

The prayer traditions transmitted the important discovery of the paradoxical character of God's mode of givenness. The givenness of God as the Other, unlike signs and images, is authentic but, unlike the originary givenness of ontological feelings to the self, can never be lived by the self. (In phenomenological parlance God would be an "appresentation."<sup>58</sup>) Knowledge of God's givenness is not an inference or a comparison. Ricoeur maintains that the transfer by which the self's feelings form a "pair" with another and, as the traditions add, with God as Other is "a prereflexive, predicative operation," an "analogizing grasp"<sup>59</sup>—not an intuition. God's feelings are apprehended as belonging to God, for the same reason that our own feelings are ours. Ricoeur says that the analogizing grasp points to an "enigma": "the sphere of ownness" is transgressed as a "transfer" of "the sense of the ego" to another heart, which, as heart, "also contains the sense of ego."<sup>60</sup> I conclude that God as an alter ego is a second heart. The dissymmetry latent in analogies overwhelms the understanding and ever-and-again reduces the self to silence. Ricoeur says the analogy with other selves does not create otherness, "which is always presupposed," but in "transgressing" the interiority of the self centered on itself (what the traditions call divestment), the analogical grasp "confers a specific meaning, namely the admission that the other, is not condemned to

<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur, *Fallible* 161. Ricoeur identifies "Spiritual Joy" with Descartes, "the Intellectual Love" with Spinoza, and "the Beatitude" with Bergson.

<sup>57</sup> *Confessions* 1.5.

<sup>58</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 333–34.

<sup>59</sup> For my interpretation of the concept of "analogizing grasp," I am here indebted to Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 329–35.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 334.



remain a stranger but can become *my counterpart*, that is, someone who, *like me*, says ‘I.’”<sup>61</sup> The analogy does not give the sense of “alter” but of ego, so that I can conclude that we know that God shares our formless feelings. At the same time formless feelings reveal the limited, dissymmetrical, nature of our understanding.<sup>62</sup>

The question of God as alter is frequently formulated in the question: How do we know we are not simply talking to ourselves when we pray? The traditions assume that in truth most of the time we are talking to ourselves. They add that that too can be said of much of our conversations with other people. How often do we take our eyes off ourselves? We are crossing no thresholds—*limina*—entering no unique spaces. And yet above all our transitory needs and the uses we have for each other, of protection, recognition, mutual support, romantic love, and so forth, we meet a person in their uniqueness. Discipline, silence, agility are needed to cross a threshold, to see the other in his or her difference and to work to maintain that difference, to enhance the other’s uniqueness and never to possess the other or to seek to mould the other. It is no doubt as difficult to listen to and to love the other for his or her own sake as it is to listen to and to love God for God’s own sake.

It is fruitful to compare prayer to human communication. The traditions find an honoring of difference and an emancipatory practice.<sup>63</sup> They would look for the same in human intercourse with God. But they go further and pick out unique characteristics of the singular relationship with God. First, there can be no cause of consolation, otherwise the presence would not be God—an “otherwise than being” in Levinas’s phrase—but some “idol,” some sense object or some product of the imagination. The spirit must talk from within in those parts of the self that are open to the infinite.

Second, the listening will be, in the time-honored phrase, “nonconceptual light.” Practically such listening involves a divestment for the human

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 335.

<sup>62</sup> T. J. van Bavel says, Augustine does not hesitate to call this kind of ignorance a “*pia ignorantia, docta ignorantia*.” (“God in between Affirmation and Negation according to Augustine,” in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, ed. Joseph Lienhard, Earl Muller, and Roland Teske [New York: Peter Lang, 1993] 73–97, at 80). “Strictly speaking, we cannot even say that God is ineffable” (ibid. 77). “Augustine always denies that we can apprehend God; he uses the term *attingere* (to touch, or to come in contact with) which expresses, rather, a real relationship between the human person and God” (ibid. 84). If we should understand in order to believe and believe in order to understand, we should seek in such a way that what matters is “the desire to seek, not the presumption to know unknown things. Let us, therefore, so seek as about to find, and so find as about to seek” (ibid. 82).

<sup>63</sup> Mark K. Taylor, “Religion, Cultural Plurality, and Liberating Praxis: In Conversation with Langdon Gilkey,” *Journal of Religion* 71 (1991) 145–66.

intellect, which can work only with concepts. Autonomous in its quest, the self must sustain a state of intellectual deprivation. At the same time, the self must be sufficiently selfless that it is no longer totally absorbed in itself but can, with the medieval mystics, “live in self-oblivion.” One might imagine that self-oblivion is achieved by an *ascesis*—an emptying out of the self—and an asceticism whose acid dissolves the self’s certainties in a faith that “doubts by fidelity to itself.”<sup>64</sup> Such is not the case. *Ascesis* is not achieved; one does not actively empty oneself. One is emptied; one is divested; Another pours the acid. It all happens in the passive voice. Meister Eckart claims that we do not prepare or “reserve a place” for God to act in, for we do “not know what God is doing” in us.<sup>65</sup> As Augustine saw clearly, God acts in God’s own self and in the resulting active passivity, in actionless action, we are our true selves: “You [God] were more inward than the most inward place of my heart and loftier than the highest.”<sup>66</sup> We are the self that gains nothing. Such prayer concerns God, not the self. God’s freedom, not the self’s. Such prayer seeks truth for truth’s own sake.<sup>67</sup>

For the traditions the third characteristic is the decisive sign that Another is talking and not the endless monologue. The Other is solicitous for the other in his or her otherness. “The real secret of the God who is love” is God’s being for the other, God’s solicitousness in which God gives “without reason, without limit, without return, without self-conscious

<sup>64</sup> Antoine Vergote, *The Religious Man: A Psychological Study of Religious Attitudes*, trans. Marie-Bernard Said (Dayton, Ohio: Pflam, 1969) 235.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 9.

<sup>66</sup> *Confessions* 3.6.

<sup>67</sup> Merton says that the “divine likeness in us which is the core of our being and is ‘in God’ even more than it is ‘in us,’ is the focus of God’s inexhaustible creative delight.” Merton then quotes Eckhart: “In this likeness or identity God takes such delight that he pours his whole nature and being into it. His pleasure is as great, to take a simile, as that of a horse, let loose over a green heath, where the ground is level and smooth, to gallop as a horse will, as fast as he can over the greensward—for this is a horse’s pleasure and nature. It is so with God. It is his pleasure and rapture to discover identity, because he can always put his whole nature into it—for he is this identity itself” (Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* 11). Levinas captures a comparable dispossession but for the after-Auschwitz world: “Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement that never wears out. The liberation is not an action, a commencement, nor any vicissitude of essence and of ontology, where the equality with oneself would be established in the form of self-consciousness. An anarchic liberation, it emerges, without being assumed, without turning into a beginning, in inequality with oneself. It is brought out without being assumed, in the undergoing by sensibility beyond its capacity to undergo” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 124).

after-thought.”<sup>68</sup> Here the traditions try to capture the incomprehensible freedom and solicitous transcendence of God in society and the self. Humans grow toward God’s mysterious self but never grasp God’s self, for there is no vision of God. Consolation is to experience a free and solicitous transcendence that awakens the self to a beyond itself within itself, in which the self acts. Consolation opens up within the most intimate self a beyond itself as a free solicitude beyond all elitism. Many stories try to capture the interior experience of selflessness, of actionless action, of the Pauline “I no longer live but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20, NIV). For example, there is the story of the hermit who ran after a thief the hermit had surprised in the act of stealing the his shoes, in order to return to the thief the shoe he had dropped in his flight.<sup>69</sup>

The experience of disinterested solicitude as Other is unverifiable and, ultimately, incomprehensible. The Other always withdraws. John Henry Newman says humans can catch a glimpse of God’s grace only out of the corner of their eye. The Other lives in self-oblivion. In this sense the Other always includes a negation, for the Other is unlimited affirmation. The self entrusts itself to the Other and this entrusting of the self is self-validating. The experience is the quite ordinary nonelitist experience of God’s solicitude as Other. But the self does not habitually dwell in solicitude because the self is too taken up with itself and its own justice, or with guilt, ignorance, and fear.

The experience in the absence of the causal object is utter receptivity to God. It is conversion, selflessness. It is the very ordinary, nonelitist experience of the love of God. The experience of God is a dual experience. In the Other, the self recognizes itself as if for the first time and, at one and the same time, recognizes that, even though across transitory objects, the self has always known the Other who gives with a solicitousness that is “without reason, without limit, without return, without self-conscious after-thought.”<sup>70</sup>

### THE INTERIOR JOURNEY AND THE ETHICAL TRACE

At first sight it appears that Levinas’s critique and, by extension, Amery’s and Levi’s were misguided. True, the interior journey aims to do

<sup>68</sup> Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* 136.

<sup>69</sup> Daisetz T. Suzuki tells a comparable Zen story. A farmer placed a ladder under his tree so that a thief who was stealing the fruit could descend safely. Suzuki draws the lesson: “The farmer’s heart, emptied of self and possession, could not think of anything else but the danger that might befall the young village delinquent” (“Knowledge and Innocence,” as quoted in Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* 111).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* 136.

justice to the primacy of God known in inner experience and in continuity with the self, and Levinas's exterior journey rejects the interior route to God. Levinas claims that God can be known, if at all, only as an ethical trace left by the call to justice coming from the neighbor as other. Even though the interior journey can only presuppose that God was truly Another, yet the way of interior divestment appears to be compatible with the exterior journey's solicitude for the other. In what follows, I will show that Levinas and the Auschwitz witnesses are entirely correct in their criticism of the way of interior divestment. Auschwitz poses with renewed urgency a perennial and fundamental question: Can the inner journey be a way of disinterested, ethical solicitude?

The "death of God" argument maintains that survival needs of many kinds give rise to values and beliefs. Levinas claims that disinterested responsibility for the Good is an exception. Disinterested goodness antecedes needs and survival concerns. Disinterestedness gives rise to the irresistible impulse that drove Levi and Amery to give voice to the victims of Auschwitz.<sup>71</sup> The same insight leads the practitioner along the way of divestment on the interior journey. That is why prayer traditions gradually lead practitioners beyond their vital needs and habitual certainties to listen to the wordless voice of God within. Both ways agree, then, that value can arouse desire. But—and this looks like a decisive difference—Levinas adds that "the Good declines the desire it arouses."<sup>72</sup> The Good does not lead to knowledge of God. God withdraws and can be recognized only in responsibility for others. The Good is known only in my finding myself already bound by my commitment to the afflicted. The Good maintains its selfhood by excluding itself from "the analysis."<sup>73</sup> The Good can be known only in the trace left by responsibility. By way of contrast, Levinas believes that the self of the interior journey could be compassionate for another after having had an experience of God. The experience of God on the interior journey is created by the self's own needs and impulses such as guilt or insecurity. As one progresses along the inward way, the "sovereign ego" can, by a

<sup>71</sup> Impulses and needs of every kind create values, but, says Levinas, we need not agree with the "death of God" argument and "reduce every value arousing an impulse to an impulse arousing a value" (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 123). I believe that Levi's and Amery's atheism precisely rejects belief in a God who is at the end of an argument in which an impulse arouses a value. Their atheism is not the subject of the present essay. Their atheism does give rise to a serious misgiving on my part. Am I honestly listening to their witness when I claim that Amery's and Levi's disinterested goodness can be understood as a Levinasian trace of the divine? This suspicion ceases to haunt my examination of their incomparable witness and sends me back continually to the record to see if I am betraying them. It revives the misgiving: Am I, by distorting what they say, subjecting them yet again to their experience of the unlistened-to story that has already proved fatal?

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

process of “auto-affection,” choose to be charitable out of feelings of compassion.<sup>74</sup>

Is Levinas right? There are striking similarities between the two ways. On the interior journey, the way of divestment swims against the current of auto-affection. The way of divestment rejects any observable cause—a sensation or imaginative product—for the experience of God. Divestment likewise involves intellectual deprivation in which faith, faithful to its nature, doubts established certainties. Living in self-oblivion, a speculative and emotional *kenosis*, is a far cry from the imperial ego of auto-identification. The self is drawn on toward God by God’s nonelitist solicitude for the other, to a God who gives without reason, without limit, without return, without self-conscious afterthought. The experience of God’s incomprehensible freedom and solicitous transcendence awakens the self to a beyond itself within itself. In an attempt to capture the paradoxical experience in words, the traditions talk of selfless listening, living in self-oblivion, and actionless action; and they have recourse to stories like that of the hermit who ran after the thief to return to the thief the shoe he had dropped as he tried to escape. With this and similar stories the traditions capture Levinas’s sense of agonistic solicitude for one’s persecutor. On the apophatic way to the incomprehensible God, the self negates itself to open itself in utter receptivity to God and to arrive at an unlimited affirmation. In apophatic conversion and selflessness, the self recognizes itself in recognizing the solicitous Other. The journey outward and the journey inward would seem to be the same journey.

The story of the hermit and the thief and the comparable story of the Zen farmer placing his ladder under the fruit tree alert us to a decisive difference. It is universally acknowledged that these stories are trans- or a-ethical. The hermit, like the farmer, is solicitous for the thief; his selflessness reaches out to the point of identification. In a comparable Levinasian story, the hermit would not aid and abet the thief despite his knavery, nor would he, following Suzuki’s Zen teaching, be content to remove the thief from circulation through incarceration.<sup>75</sup> Instead he would become responsible for him. The ethical version retains the otherness of the protagonists. Disinterested goodness appeals to ethical reasoning, not to a God who “gives without reason.” Otherness, radical exteriority, is Levinas’s theme. The a-ethical version, with its formless ontological feeling, could equally well exemplify fusional mysticism or pantheism in which any self can equally fuse with all others.

The implications of the a-ethical story became a matter of life and death for Chaim Kaplan and the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto. Kaplan

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Suzuki, in Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* 106–8.

appealed to the God of justice and morality over the Christian God of love. In his diary for October 7, 1939, he writes: "Misfortune does not trouble the hearts of these [Polish Catholic] practitioners of the 'religion of love.' When they suffer misfortune, they merely cause others to suffer in turn."<sup>76</sup> Primo Levi dismissed as submoral Dostoyevsky's story of Grushenka, who was redeemed from hell for a petty act of kindness.<sup>77</sup> Amery demands justice. Levinas's inestimable insight has been to uncover the a-ethical roots of the interior journey that bear such evil fruit.

Has Levinas uncovered the a-ethical roots in such a way that one can still follow the interior journey but be protected and guided by his ethical discipline? The ethical and mystical journeys can be the same journey of agonistic solicitousness for the Other only if divestment, in which the self finds its true self in self-oblivion, does not reduce the otherness of the other to the same.<sup>78</sup>

Inspiration, the for-the-other characteristic of the subject, is a specifically ethical journey divesting the ego. True, an ego can be troubled by a guilt complex. But a guilt complex is not the motive that drives the divested self inasmuch as a guilt complex presupposes that the self was initially free even if only in some immemorial past. Nor can the motive of the divested self be understood as "a natural benevolence or divine 'instinct' nor as some love or some tendency to sacrifice."<sup>79</sup> These are the sorts of interior objects one has been led to expect to find on the journey inward. And all too often the journey inward stops here, as we see in the story of the hermit and the thief. These interior objects imply an initial self-possession in which the self was at liberty to choose. Levinas's freedom is ineluctable responsibility breathing—"inspiring"—the ethical life into the self, creating the self before the self could assume possession of itself.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Chaim Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, trans. and ed. Abraham I. Katsh (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 47. It is important to acknowledge that some Christians did aid Jews during the Nazi years. For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer helped found the Confessing Church, which was the German Protestant church that opposed the Nazis. He belonged to the German resistance movement, opposed the anti-Jewish laws, helped Jews escape to Switzerland, contacted the Allies during the war to find a way to end the war, and was involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler. In his letters written from prison, Bonhoeffer, like Levinas, claims that unlimited "being there for others," "existence for others"—what Bonhoeffer calls "watching with Christ in Gethsemane"—brings us into contact with the infinite God. Bonhoeffer was hung by the Gestapo in 1945. See *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller and Frank Clark (London: SCM, 1971) 381, 370.

<sup>77</sup> Levi, *Drowned and the Saved* 41.

<sup>78</sup> For the status of the divested subject see above, n. 29.

<sup>79</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 124.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 124, 111.

Levinas identifies the authentic schematism of the interior feelings that accompany one's status as an ethical hostage. First he excludes natural benevolence and divine instinct. What part, then, of the self is moved by the divine trace schematized as the ethical? Levinas replies that the relation of subsisting as a substitute for all identifies the spot that is moved: substitution "signifies the wound that cannot heal over of the self in the ego accused by the other to the point of persecution, and responsible for its persecutor."<sup>81</sup> Substitution is Levi's and Amery's responsibility for the German people. The self is subjected to its persecutor and elevated in "the subjection of the allegiance to the Good."<sup>82</sup> The self is simultaneously subjected and elevated. It is subjected in ethical substitution for the persecutor. This substitution, as "the wound that cannot heal over," as accusation "to the point of persecution," reveals the awesome distance between the shame of the world and disinterested responsibility—*mysterium tremendum*. At the same time, the self is elevated in disinterested goodness, in disinterested pity for the persecuted. This elevation reveals the specifically ethical allegiance of the *mysterium fascinans*.

Since God is beyond essence, the feelings that most radically interiorize the ethical schema—"shame of the world" and "disinterested pity"—must also be beyond form, to use the words of the interior journey. The givenness of God as the Other can never be lived by us. We know the mode of God's givenness neither as an inference nor as a comparison. Mystical theology maintains that the transfer by which one's feelings form a pair with God's is a prereflexive, predicative operation, an analogizing grasp—not an intuition—by which God's feelings are apprehended as belonging to God, for the same reason that my own feelings are mine. If my formless feelings are most radically interiorized in Levinas's ethical schema, we must look to the ethical schema for a trace of God.

When we examine the absolute, accusative character of the ethical self, Levi's and Amery's responsibility appears as "the shame of the world" and "disinterested pity." Shame of the world marks the ethical wound of the *mysterium tremendum*, of humanity's distance from Disinterested Goodness, the heart of finitude. This shame in which the inmates drowned solely because the Germans, and not they, had created Auschwitz, "jolts" and "traumatizes" Levi and Amery. They are obsessed even to the point of suicide with witnessing to the German people.

Disinterested pity draws the self toward the ethical *mysterium fascinans* of disinterested goodness. Disinterested pity has a double focus. The first focus is Levi's and Amery's pity for the drowned inmates of Auschwitz. Levi's and Amery's pity draws them irresistibly—*fascinans*—to the Good. The second focus is God's pity. In disinterested suffering, which is prior to

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 126.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



freely chosen suffering, Levinas says in a passage that deserves to be recalled in full, we “catch sight of a suffering of suffering, a suffering because of what is pitiful in my suffering, which is a suffering ‘for God’ who suffers from my suffering. There is an anarchic trace of God in passivity.”<sup>83</sup> Passive suffering neither purifies nor redeems. As disinterested, the suffering of the Auschwitz witnesses—Levi and Amery—reveals to the believer one who suffers from their suffering. That Other is the one whose gift of disinterested goodness made them a hostage to the German people after Auschwitz.

Levinas adds that it is impossible to escape God: the impossibility “lies in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity.”<sup>84</sup> The phrase “absolute passivity” points to an enigma. The sphere of “ownness” is doubly transgressed, first as a decentered self, who is ineluctably responsible, and second, as an analogizing transfer of the sense of the decentered self to another passivity. The other passivity as passivity also contains the sense of a decentered self. Thus God as an alter ego is another passivity. God withdraws. The speed at which God recedes is proportionate to the degree of the ineluctable disinterestedness of the Auschwitz witnesses on which the analogy was based.

Levinas’s ethical testimony does not draw on knowledge or thematize the divine. His formulation of ethical testimony consists in unsaying what is said in an analogizing ethical grasp. The rupture of unsaying the said shows that ethical testimony as “here I am” before the Other is not a knowledge but a recognition of responsibility. The responsibility of the witness belongs to “the glory of the Infinite” inasmuch as the witnesses and their testimony tell what the Infinite’s disinterested goodness is capable of doing.<sup>85</sup> Responsibility inspires the self to goodness in spite of itself.

Passivity, the for-the-other of the divested self, by which the self simultaneously approaches and recedes from God, cannot, then, be understood “as some love.”<sup>86</sup> In this simple phrase Levinas deconstructs the Neoplatonic Christian mystical tradition. The tradition can be rehabilitated if love is understood in severely ethical terms as the primal Goodness that withdraws and is known in the trace of responsibility for the obsessive neighbor. Levinas says the same of Jewish prayers that initially address God as “thou,” but that gradually, as God’s transcendence supervenes, address God as “he.”<sup>87</sup> The transposition from “thou” to “he” shows that even when the self says “here I am” in obedience to the approach of the Other,

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 196 n. 21.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 128.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 146, 114.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 124.

<sup>87</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Dusquene University, 1985) 106.

the Infinite does not show itself. Instead, the subject, by taking responsibility for the unlimited ethical demand, bears witness to the Infinite.

Levinas concludes: "It is through this testimony that the very glory of the Infinite glorifies itself. The term 'glory' does not belong to the language of contemplation."<sup>88</sup> Instead of contemplation, the glory of the Infinite breaks out in moral action, in the "here I am" of the disinterested ethical subject. Levinas admits that the "exteriority of the Infinite becomes somehow an inwardness in the sincerity of a witness borne."<sup>89</sup> But he does not agree that inwardness is a secret place hidden away inside the self.<sup>90</sup> Such inwardness is eminently exterior. The infinite orders the self by the self's own voice: "here I am."<sup>91</sup> The infinitely exterior becomes an inward voice only to the extent that the self's own voice bears witness publicly to its responsibility. The pity and shame that decenter the ego and rupture its interiority leave a trace, in an analogizing ethical grasp, of disinterested Goodness. Pity and shame make "signs to another." But, in as much as pity and shame reveal responsibility and result in action, they do not give direct knowledge of Goodness. Pity and shame can act only as "signs of this very giving of signs."<sup>92</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Levinas views the interior journey as the way of auto-affection and auto-identification. But we have found that the interior way of divestment is a way of selflessness, in which practitioners recognize themselves in the solicitous Other and progress toward an active solicitude and responsibility for the afflicted and even for their enemies. Levinas takes the questioning a step further. He intends to determine the status of the divested subject. He fears that we will forget that our concern for justice and solicitude derives from, and is justified by, our unlimited initial responsibility for the other. Forgetting, as in "forgiving and forgetting," gives rise to the egoism of auto-affection that he discovers in the natural benevolence or divine instinct accredited to the divested self on its interior journey. Here the divested self was initially self-possessed and free and, therefore, at liberty to choose the way of justice and solicitude. In contrast, primary freedom—what Levinas calls "an-archic" freedom—is a prior, unlimited responsibility for the other who accuses. In responsibility Levinas discovers a passivity the will cannot assume.

With the primordial ethical root exposed, I thought it might be possible to follow the way of the interior journey guided by Levinas's ethical

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>89</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 147.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

discipline. First, I examined an important discovery of Christian mysticism. Since God is beyond essence, the feelings that most radically interiorize the supreme intention of reason and the search for true happiness must be beyond form. Levi's and Amery's witness reveals that the authentic schematism of the interior feelings lies in the ethical responsibility of shame of the world (*mysterium tremendum*) and disinterested pity and goodness (*mysterium fascinans*). The conclusion follows that the authentic schematism is not natural benevolence, not divine instinct, but the relation of subsisting as a substitute: subjected in the ethical shame of the afflicted and elevated in disinterested pity and goodness.

The exterior journey reveals the otherness of God; the interior journey reveals the mode of God's givenness. I recalled that, according to Christian mysticism, the givenness of God as the Other can never be lived by us. The mode of God's givenness can be known only by an analogizing grasp—not an intuition—by which God's feelings are apprehended as belonging to God, for the same reason that my own feelings are mine. It follows that, if my formless feelings are most radically interiorized in Levinas's ethical schema, then I must look for a trace of God in the "accusative" status of the self. In the pitiful suffering of the Auschwitz witnesses, I found a suffering that is prior to assumed suffering. Unheeded, their suffering neither purifies nor redeems. According to Levinas, such suffering, as disinterested, reveals Another who suffers from their suffering in absolute passivity. That Other is the one whose disinterested goodness made them hostage selves.

What does the analogizing ethical grasp reveal? Positively, it reveals that, as decentered selves, the ethical passivity of the Auschwitz witnesses serves as a trace of another passivity that, as passivity, also contains the sense of a decentered self. I concluded that, on this view, God as an alter ego is another passivity who always withdraws. God withdraws for, just as the selves of the Auschwitz witnesses could not assume their responsibility—they were primordially confounded in the wordless accusation of their unlistened-to story—so the extent of God's decentered selfhood cannot be measured. There is only a trace proportionate to the infinite accusation, responsibility, and the disinterested goodness of the Auschwitz witnesses.

Negatively, the analogizing ethical grasp reveals that inner dialogue with God can be understood only as the fission of the inner self decentered by the unlimited command uttered by the self whom it commands. In these Levinasian words I recuperate, ethically and in response to Auschwitz, the radical decentering Augustine knew in a very different time and place, when he rejoiced to confess the radical mysteriousness of God who is more intimate to Augustine than he is to himself. Inasmuch as the analogizing grasp is in the ethical accusative, Levinas can agree. "Activity and passivity

coincide,” but in the ethical.<sup>93</sup> Ethical coincidence is “outside of any mysticism”<sup>94</sup> understood as auto-affection, natural benevolence, divine instinct, or fusional longing. The glory of the Infinite breaks out in disinterested goodness on the journey of responsibility, obsession, shame, and pity, along the Auschwitz way. Testimony, the for-the-other of Amery’s and Levi’s witnesses, gives death an ethical meaning in the midst of their anguish.

The journey inward, understood in terms of the outward ethical journey, can advance understanding of the relationship to God after Auschwitz. To be true to itself the relationship to God can only become ever more agonistic and apophatic, more so, perhaps, than even Augustine would have imagined. Understood in terms of an analogizing ethical grasp, prayer becomes a meeting and a listening in which, as moral subjects, God and the self are subjected in their passive and accusative responsibility and elevated in their allegiance to Goodness. Goodness, disinterested goodness, continuously withdraws, leaving an ethical trace of God in responsibility for the afflicted and afflicting other.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 115.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.