

THE “ETHICAL ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE” AND THE RELIGIOUS ETHICS OF LEVINAS

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ABSTRACT

Why did Levinas choose Isaiah 45:7 (“I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all that”) as a superscription of his essay on evil? This article explores the role of evil in Levinas’s religious ethics. The author discusses the structure of evil as revealed phenomenologically and juxtaposes it to the structure of subjectivity found in the writings of Levinas. The idea of the “ethical anthropic principle,” modeled upon the cosmic anthropic principle, is then used to link evil to the responsibility of the subject. The link is subsequently extended to God. This is proposed as one way of understanding the meaning of Isaiah 45:7.

KEY WORDS: *anthropic principle, ethical anthropic principle, evil, God, Levinas*

AS A SUPERSCRPTION FOR HIS ESSAY “Transcendence and Evil” (Levinas 1998), Emmanuel Levinas chose Isaiah 45:7: “I make peace and create evil: I the LORD do all that.”¹ The choice of Isaiah 45:7 is curious. On the surface, what we have here is a supposedly loving and benevolent God proudly declaring Himself to be the author of evil. Religious skeptics impressed by the argument from evil could not have chosen a better line. Clearly, Levinas is not troubled by the logical implications of Isaiah 45:7. To begin with, he openly admits that there is evil in the world. Whatever else is said about the world, it must be said that evil exists. It is a component of the empirical world, or *the said (le dit)*—so much so that the question of justice occupies a special place in Levinas’s writings. Justice is what there must be in *the said* as a way of minimizing the effects of evil. Our thematization and conceptualization of *the said* must include justice. However, once all that is said and done, the question that still remains is how evil can be a saying of God, or a part of *the saying (le dire)*. Although Levinas never takes the Bible literally, he does take it *religiously*, that is, as a source of religious inspiration. But what inspiration could there possibly be in Isaiah 45:7? The aim of this article

¹The King James version has been substituted for the version used in the English translation of “Transcendence and Evil.”

is to throw some light on the problem of evil, drawing on Levinas's response to evil. At the heart of his response is the idea that evil somehow seeks me out as the unique person to respond to it, as if it has been created *for me*. Since there is in this idea an echo of the anthropic principle in cosmology, it may be called the "ethical anthropic principle." I will show that it is by means of some such principle that we can come to terms with God being the author of evil and can be inspired to goodness by the saying of evil.

1. The Nature of Evil

1.1 *The signification of the term "evil"*

Evil manifests itself in the world as a particular kind of pain and suffering. The signifier "evil" is not properly applied to the sort of pain that is part of a gain, such as the muscle aches of an exhilarating mountain climb, nor to the suffering that is known to follow a pleasure, such as the hangover of the morning after. Even *excessive* pain and suffering, such as the unbearable pain of a cancer sufferer or the inconsolable grief of a mother who has just lost a son, is not quite what constitutes evil. This kind of pain and suffering is understandable, can be anticipated and to some extent managed with drugs or psychotherapy. Most people would be able to integrate such pain and suffering into their understanding of the world, even if they cannot tolerate them, as long as they have some ideas of the why and the how of their genesis and mechanism. It is when the intolerable pain or the unbearable suffering cannot be accounted for or explained in any way, when it is utterly gratuitous, overwhelming reason and sensibility, that it becomes an evil.² Insofar as someone can be said to intend to inflict evil pain and suffering, he or she is evil. There is evil in the world. The death of over eight million people in World War I and over thirty million in World War II, many of whom died in gas chambers, is evil. So are the senseless killings of dozens of people at a time by crazed gunmen, the murdering of children by children, the unspeakable

² One is here reminded of Clifford Geertz's characterization of evil: ". . . the problem of evil is concerned with threats to our ability to make sound moral judgments. What is involved in the problem of evil is not the adequacy of our symbolic resources to govern our affective life, but the adequacy of those resources to provide a workable set of ethical criteria, normative guides to govern our action. The vexation here is the gap between things as they are and they ought to be if our conceptions of right and wrong make sense. . ." (Geertz 1975, 106). For Geertz, the essence of evil is its incomprehensibility. This is poignantly expressed in the story of an old woman of the Lla-speaking people of Northern Rhodesia, who had lost all her loved ones, including "the children of her children," and who went in search of her God, "the Besetting One," for an answer, only to die "of a broken heart" (Geertz 1975, 103-4).

acts of pedophiles, “ethnic cleansing,” and many other horrors reported almost daily.

The point above can be put more precisely. In an evil, the pain and suffering are certainly excessive, but something is not an evil just because it involves excessive pain and suffering. The pain of a grieving mother is excessive, but the cause of her grief may not be an evil. Levinas has correctly characterized the nature of evil, calling it an *excess* of pain and suffering. A pain or a suffering that is excessive, but not an excess, is still understandable in terms of that which it exceeds, and it can be integrated with it in a continuum, or with some other goods. Being excessive is not yet evil because while we may be unable to tolerate it, we may still be able to accept it, as we accept an excessively painful dental treatment for the sake of dental health, or an exceptionally painful grief as a condition of love. It is an evil only when it is an excess, something that cannot be integrated with others of the same kind on a certain scale, or with something else as in an organic whole. As Levinas puts it, the “quality’ of evil is this *non-integratableness* itself” (Levinas 1998, 128).³ The etymology of the word “evil” lends some support to this view. Thus, in the Middle English form of *uvel* or the Old High German form of *ubil*, or the modern German *übel*, there is a root that refers to “up” or “over” (*über* in modern German), indicating the primary sense of evil as something that is over and above, or overflows, the upper limit of a scale, something beyond a continuum. Evil breaks with everything else we can understand or accept. To drive home the point, Levinas continues: “Evil is not only the non-integratable, it is also the non-integratableness of the non-integratable” (1998, 128) It is a “surplus to the world,” an excess that signals “the impossibility of our accepting it” (1998, 131). In another essay, Levinas refers to the pain and suffering in an evil as “useless suffering,” a suffering that “results from an excess, a ‘too much’” that surpasses “the measure of our sensibility and our means of grasping and holding” (1988, 156). Useless suffering, hence evil, is “unassumable” (1988, 156).

In the case of a pain or suffering that is not an excess, even when it is excessive, there is nothing over and above the painful experience itself. One is not conscious of anything other than the pain itself. But when it is an excess, or an evil (*das Übel*), there is something over and above (*über*) the experience of pain. In addition to the consciousness of the pain, one is also conscious of the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, of a sense of utter loss and vulnerability, as if a gaping nothingness

³ With the exception of the quotations in section 2.1, all quotations in the text of this article are from the works of Levinas; therefore, all subsequent references to the works of Levinas will give only the date of the English translation and the page. Citations in section 2.1 and in the notes will conform to the author/date style of documentation.

had opened up beneath one's feet. As Levinas puts it in "Useless Suffering," in an evil, one is conscious of something more passive and more negative than the experience of pain: the suffering of an evil is "an ordeal more passive than experience," and the "not of evil is negative right up to non-sense" (1988, 157). Borrowing a description from Philippe Nemo, Levinas characterizes the feeling of this "more" (*über*) as *anguish*: "Anguish is the sharp point at the heart of evil. A malady, a disease of living flesh, aging, corruptible; a declining and a rotting" (1998, 127). However, unlike the anguish spoken of by the existentialists, an anguish that remains in the totality of being and constitutes its essence, the anguish of evil signifies an excess, an "over and above," an otherwise than being and beyond essence, insofar as it consists in "opening the horizon of nothingness, more radically negative than that of negation. . . ," "a *beyond* that neither negation nor the anguish of the philosophers of existence conceived" (1998, 127).

1.2 *The adult's God*

Once we grasp Levinas's understanding of the nature of evil, his choice of Isaiah 45:7 as an epigraph seems even more puzzling, given his commitment to religion. It would appear that the presence of evil in the world presents the religious person with only two options: either justify evil in a theodicy or accept atheism. Empirically, the first option is a daunting one, given the extent of evil in the world. As Levinas points out, "the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness . . . is that of the destruction of all balance between the explicit and implicit theodicy of Western thought and the forms which suffering and its evil take in the very unfolding of this century" (1988, 161). Also, for Levinas, the construction of theodicies goes against our "ethical sensibility," which confirms itself "in the inhumanity of our time, against this inhumanity" (1988, 163). Any attempt at justifying evil will dull this sensibility. Indeed, Levinas is much more forceful, claiming that "the justification of the neighbour's pain is certainly the source of all immorality" (1988, 163). More importantly, however, the nature of evil logically rules out the first option. Since evil by its nature signifies the impossibility of acceptance, or "unassumability," or "non-integratableness," it cannot, in principle, be justified in any way. Differently put, if pain and suffering can be justified, then they are no longer useless, hence no longer evil.

That leaves the second option, namely atheism. Often, atheism is embraced as a knee-jerk reaction to evil. Levinas is rightly disdainful of such reaction. Thus, in *Difficult Freedom*, he asks impatiently: "The empty sky' or 'waiting in vain for Godot,' or 'God is dead'. What childish nonsense do these puerile remarks hope to counterbalance?" (1990,

249). Beyond the kind of atheism expressed in these “puerile remarks,” however, there is the well-known “argument from evil.” The logical force of this argument is irresistible, and Levinas does not try to resist it; in fact, he can be said to have happily embraced it. Levinas is quite happy to agree that the presence of evil means the death of a certain kind of god. If we have in mind what was “previously a fairly primary sort of God [who] had dished out prizes, inflicted punishment or pardoned sins—a God who . . . treated men like children” (1990, 143), then in the face of evil we have to declare such a God dead. Indeed, we must declare such a God dead in order to embrace a “religion for adults” (1990, 11), a religion in which the worshiper does not expect to be taken care of or protected by God, and especially does not expect to be protected from the evils that some people choose to inflict on others. Out in the street, a child has to be accompanied by an adult, but to be an adult is to be able to walk any path unaccompanied: “The path that leads to the one God must be walked in part without God” (1990, 143). Admittedly, the existence of evil makes it difficult to walk along this path as an adult. The streets are too dangerous even for grown-ups. What is demanded of a religious adult is a “difficult adoration” (1990, 145) of a God who “retires from the world and hides His face” (1990, 143), a God who chooses to be absent from the site of evil. Still, we have to grow up, and to grow up, which can be difficult, we have to abandon the infantile idea of a mystical God and accept a “God Who renounces all aids to manifestation, and appeals instead to the full maturity of the responsible man”: “The adult’s God is revealed precisely through the void of the child’s heaven” (1990, 143).

All this is well and good, but the persistence of evil still demands an explanation. Can the adoration of a God who hides His face at the site of evil be more than just difficult, even to the point of being impossible? Why should there be evil at all? How are we to take Isaiah 45:7, *the saying* of the Lord to the effect that He creates evil? Levinas admits that these are the “legitimate demands of atheism,” demands that the religion for adults “is duty bound to answer” (1990, 143). It may be fairly said that Levinas’s philosophy in its entirety is an attempt to answer these legitimate demands. His response is both complex and subtle. In what follows, I will try to outline the shape of it. Since an outline can be drawn only against a background, it is necessary first to lay out the background. That background is none other than the world itself, *the said*, a world with warts and all, with evil doers as well as saints. Indeed, there is no background other than the *hic et nunc*. Responding to evil in the world is a question only if we believe that we are somehow *called upon* to respond, that is, to accept that the world, in which there is evil, has been somehow created *for me*. Thus, we must start with the idea that the world as it is has been somehow created for me, and I must

respond to all the existential demands imposed on me, just as I must respond to all the physical demands imposed on me by the same world. This idea may be called the “ethical anthropic principle” in view of the fact that, following Levinas, the response to evil that is *for me* must be an ethical one.

2. The “Ethical Anthropic Principle”

The term “anthropic principle” was coined by the physicist Brandon Carter. It states that “what we can expect to observe must be restricted by the conditions necessary for our presence as observers” (Carter 1974, 292). Carter arrived at this principle in the process of pointing out the observed evidence of cosmic “fine tuning,” or what he calls “large number coincidences.” It says, in effect, that despite the highly improbable coincidences that cry out for an explanation, the world is just what we would expect because if it were only slightly different, life would not have evolved, and there would not be any conscious organisms like us to observe it. For it to be observed is for it to be just so. How we explain the improbable coincidences is a different matter. According to John Leslie, we have to rule out pure chance because there are two plausible answers available, namely: (1) the world has been created by God, the Great Designer, either with observers like us already in it or tuned in such a way as to allow the emergence of observers like us, and (2) there exist a great many universes, so many as to allow one with the kind of cosmic fine tuning that results in the emergence of observers like us (Leslie 1989). The anthropic principle holds in either case. Leslie goes on to argue that neither of these alternatives is in principle any more or less plausible than the other, and indeed it “could seem that making God responsible for the fine tuning was preferable to believing in greatly many universes and in probabilistic variations among them” (Leslie 1997, 186).

2.1 *The observational selection effect*

The feature of the anthropic principle that is philosophically significant, or at least significant for my purposes here, is what Leslie calls the “observational selection effect”: the principle allows us to say that there is a sense in which the place and time of our observation have been selected for us, or alternatively, we have been selected to observe the world just where and when we are doing so. In the words of the author of the anthropic principle, the weak version of the principle says that “our location in the universe is *necessarily* privileged to the extent of being compatible with our existence as observers,” and the strong version, that our universe “must be such as to admit the creation of observers within it at some stage” (Carter 1974, 293). Weak or strong, the observational selection effect implies that, from the point of view of the

world, we the observers have been selected to observe it, or that, from our point of view, the world has been selected for us to observe. Whether the selection is done by God or by the cosmic process, whether it is divine or natural, depends on whether (1) or (2) above is chosen, keeping in mind that (2) requires the belief in a great many universes (or in what David Lewis calls “modal realism”). Armed with the observational selection effect, we can answer G. W. Leibniz’s question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” by saying simply that we have been selected to see something rather than nothing, rather, indeed, than anything other than just what it is.

The question now is whether there is an analogous selection effect with respect to evil. What I want to claim is that (borrowing from Carter’s formulation of the weak version of the anthropic principle) “our position in the world in which there is evil is *necessarily* privileged to the extent of being compatible with our existence as observers of evil.” Evil itself could well be a contingent feature of the world. That is to say, the cosmic fine tuning could well have produced a world just like ours in which there is no evil. However, it seems that if there is to be evil in our world, we are necessarily privileged to observe it. By this I mean that evil and the consciousness that experiences anguish in the face of evil are not antithetical, as is supposed by all those who treat evil as a scandal. There is, on the contrary, a unique “fit” between the experience of the excess of suffering and the sensibility of the one who experiences it. This feature of the world emerges together with the mind that can identify it. This is not true with respect to any other feature of the world. For instance, red objects can be observed by us but also by many animals. We can even make a machine that can observe red objects. We have not been uniquely selected in any sense to see red apples, or green frogs, or the yellow moon, or the blue sky. Indeed, when it comes to sensory observation, we are far less privileged than many other creatures. It is very different in the case of evil insofar as only moral subjects capable of feeling anguish can recognize something to be evil. This is obviously true if we take evil to be a moral *judgment* rather than a thing, or a natural quality, in the world, but it would seem to remain true even if we accept a realist ontology of evil. Whenever evil is recognized by someone, it is as if he or she has been selected to be the observer. To say that something is evil is to say that one is somehow made to see it. We could not speak of evil, just as we could not speak of cosmic fine tuning, without this observational selection effect.⁴

⁴ In invoking the anthropic principle in physics and in referring to the phenomenon I am speaking of as the “ethical anthropic principle,” I am not suggesting that the latter is somehow an extension of the former. Physics and ethics are two completely different orders. I am using the physical anthropic principle merely as a conceptual tool, a heuristic device, in constructing my account of evil.

2.2 *An alternative to a theodicy*

Levinas's own phenomenology of evil confirms the observational selection effect. For Levinas, the discovery of evil is at the same time a discovery of something like an intention: "evil reaches me as if it sought me, . . . strikes me as if there were an aim underlying the bad destiny that pursues me. . . . Evil, of itself, would be an 'aiming at me'" (1998, 129). Evil has a meaning only in a soul that has been "awakened by evil" (1998, 130). The awakened soul has been selected, or chosen, to see evil and, already awakened, to respond to it. As if having in mind the anthropic principle, Levinas confirms that the ethical equivalent of Leibniz's question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is the question "Why is there evil rather than good?" (1998, 130). He does not specifically suggest how to answer the latter question, but with the ethical analogue of the anthropic principle, or what I have called the "ethical anthropic principle," we can say that there is evil because it is evil that makes us see evil, just as there is the ringing of an alarm bell because it is the ringing of the alarm bell that awakens the sleeping person, making him or her realize that there is a ringing. The bell veritably tolls for the awakened one, and only for him or her. For everyone else, it is only a bell that rings, not an alarm bell that awakens.

As pointed out earlier, Levinas admits that evil renders difficult the adoration of a God who hides His face at the site of evil. The experience of evil threatens to render nonsensical the saying at Isaiah 45:7. However, given the idea of the ethical anthropic principle, we can take it to mean that God has to create evil to awaken a soul preselected for evil, just as there has to be the ringing of an alarm bell to awaken someone who can be roused only by an alarm bell, and just as there has to be cosmic fine tuning to bring into existence those who can observe such fine tuning. For an awakened soul to ask why there is evil rather than good is like someone who has been awakened by the alarm bell asking why there is the ringing of the bell rather than silence, or like asking why there is something rather than nothing. A soul in deep slumber is not troubled by evil any more than a sleeping person is troubled by an alarm bell that has not rung. For Levinas, the meaning of evil "begins . . . in the relation of the soul to God, starting from its being awakened by evil. God hurts me to tear me from the world as unique and exceptional: as a soul" (1998, 130).

To respond properly to evil, we must first understand evil. In this respect, it is important to stress that the idea of the ethical anthropic principle, the idea that we are in a sense chosen, or privileged, to observe evil, is meant to furnish an ethico-religious meaning of evil. It is not yet a response to evil and certainly not a justification of evil, or a theodicy. The language of "privileged" and "chosen," here as well as in

cosmology, is logical, not evaluative. As we saw in section 1, Levinas has emphatically ruled out any kind of theodicy, any kind of explanatory account that would create some false cognitive or affective integration that would close the gap between the way the world is and our conception of how it ought to be. Yet it is nevertheless possible for us to grasp the meaning of that gap—and that is what it means to understand evil clearly and without comforting fantasies. The false understanding of evil provided by theodicies prevents right response, but a right understanding of evil as the most wrenching incursion of radical otherness, which shakes us out of our self-absorption and self-extension (because we are beings who can be thus shaken out of ourselves), is the foundation of appropriate (that is, ethical) response to human suffering. It is not inconsistent for the soul that has been awakened by evil to have a hatred for evil, or a horror of evil, just as it is not inconsistent to smash the alarm clock after having been awakened by it. To see that this is so, we need to understand why a soul can be awakened by evil.

3. Evil, Transcendence, and Subjectivity

In science, the anthropic principle attempts to establish a link between the emergence of human life and the cosmology of fine tuning, showing how one is consistent with the other. In ethics, with the help of the “ethical anthropic principle,” an analogous link can be established between the coming into existence of subjectivity and the phenomenology of evil, showing how the development of the subject, the “I” (as Levinas puts it), is consistent with its being in the position to observe evil and to respond to it properly. For Levinas, the subject, or the “I” with full subjectivity, is necessarily a moral being; as such, the subject is in the position to know evil and to respond to it. To see why this is so, we need to follow Levinas in his development of the phenomenology of subjectivity.

3.1 *Radical alterity and responsibility*

Levinas begins, in *Totality and Infinity* (1969), by showing that the subject, the “I,” acquires its identity as subject by first separating or isolating itself from what is not itself. This is achieved in the process of satisfying desires, or the process of enjoyment, in which one becomes aware of one’s own happiness and unhappiness—and, thus, of one’s own ipseity. As Levinas puts it, “enjoyment . . . is isolation” (1969, 117), and isolation is the structure of the unicity of the “I.” To be aware of one’s own ipseity, or unicity, is the first step toward subjectivity. Even so, the “I” that exists completely for itself in its dealings with others is not yet an “I,” or an entity with full subjectivity. As Levinas puts it, the

enjoyment in which “I am absolutely for myself” “assuredly does not render the concrete man” (1969, 134, 139). This is so because in being “absolutely for myself,” there is no real separation between the “I” and what is not itself. Metaphysically, real separation manifests itself in a desire, or “Desire,” as Levinas puts it, to transcend the totality of one’s own being and to reach the infinity that lies on the hither side of one’s being. In Levinas’s own words, this is the “metaphysical desire [that] tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*” (1969, 33, emphasis in original). This “something else,” this “absolutely other,” is designated by the term “the other” (*l’autre*). The separation that constitutes subjectivity is completed only in the desire for the other. This desire, in turn, is fulfilled only when those with whom I deal, the others, referred to collectively by Levinas as “the Other” (*l’autrui*), are recognized by me as having a radical alterity, an otherness that cannot be absorbed by me.

Fleshed out in logical terms, Levinas’s argument is as follows: To be an “I” with full subjectivity is to be aware of one’s own ipseity—to be aware of oneself as a unique identity, or as a “unicity.” The “I,” then, must be completely separated from what is not itself and, furthermore, must have an awareness of this separation. To say the same thing differently, the “I” must be aware of the limits of its own being. As G. W. F. Hegel has shown us, the idea of the limit implies the idea of the beyond, of that which lies on the other side of the limit. Thus, the separation that constitutes the “I” requires awareness of what lies on the hither side of one’s own being. To be totally absorbed in one’s being without this awareness, to be “absolutely for myself,” is not to be “the concrete man.” It follows that subjectivity is confirmed only when there is an awareness of what is radically other than oneself, of radical alterity. As Levinas puts it in *Otherwise than Being*, the subjectivity of the “I” is constituted as a “node and a denouement” of being and the otherwise than being, “of essence and the essence’s other” (1981, 10). The next step in the argument is to show that it is in my commerce with the Other, with my fellow human beings, that I can satisfy the metaphysical desire for subjectivity, which is logically the desire for what is absolutely other, for infinity, for transcendence.

In my commerce with my fellow human beings, I can either conceptualize and thematize them, or I can see them as radically other than myself. To conceptualize and to thematize others is to reduce them to the categories of my own thought, to bring them within the limits of my being. To deal with them thus, out of a concern for my own being, is to see them as nothing but extensions of myself. I can never successfully do this to my fellow human beings, or to the Other. To begin with, insofar as my commerce with them is conducted in language, I already realize that my fellow human beings possess an alterity that cannot be absorbed into

the totality of my being. I realize that the meanings of my utterances depend not just on me but also on my interlocutors. As Levinas puts it, the “relationship of language implies transcendence, radical separation, the revelation of the other to me” (1969, 73). Furthermore, my experiences with others will show me that they have their own intentions and purposes, that the Other is “*not under a category*” and has “only a reference to himself” (1969, 69, emphasis in original). It follows that the Other possesses a radical alterity, an absolute otherness, that which is needed to confirm my subjectivity. It follows, further, that it is in the commerce with the Other that the desire for subjectivity can be fulfilled. The next stage in Levinas’s argument is to show that we can fulfill this desire, can become an “I” with full subjectivity, only by maintaining the radical alterity in others. This, in turn, we can do only by acting morally.

To experience radical alterity, I have to behave in a way such that my enjoyment is not “absolutely for myself.” To behave in this way, such that “the goods of this world break forth from the exclusive property of enjoyment,” or from the “egoist and solitary enjoyment” (1969, 76), is to behave “without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure” (1969, 133). To behave otherwise—that is, with reference only to oneself, or egoistically—is to fail to accomplish the separation that is constitutive of authentic subjectivity. To see myself as a unique “I,” I have to draw the boundaries between what is myself and what is not, and I can do so only by centering my action around what is radically other than myself, and this in turn only by “breaking forth from . . . egoist and solitary enjoyment.” Furthermore, what is required is not an isolated event of recognition; rather, I have to actively *maintain* the boundaries between myself and the other. To maintain the Other, my fellow human beings, in their heterogeneity, in their radical alterity, is my *responsibility* as an “I” in its full subjectivity. Making myself sensible of the radical alterity of the Other requires an axiological as well as a cognitive shift. I must accept that I am *responsible* for the Other as absolutely other, that is, I must act out of a concern for the Other as other, not out of a concern for myself. It is this “responsibility [that] confirms the subjectivity” of the “I” (1969, 245). Levinas goes on: “To utter ‘I,’ to affirm the irreducible singularity . . . , means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I” (1969, 245). To utter “I,” then, means to act morally toward others.

3.2 *Evil and the desire for transcendence*

We have seen that to be a subject and to maintain my subjectivity, I have to be exposed to the Other. Furthermore, I need to sharpen my sensibility of the absolutely other, hence the sensibility of my own

subjectivity, by making myself vulnerable to the Other, by exposing myself “to outrage, to wounding” (1981, 15). Better still, I have to substitute myself for the Other as a “hostage who substitutes himself for the others,” to feel responsible for all their “faults and misfortune,” to offer them “even the bread out of one’s own mouth and the coat from one’s shoulders” (1981, 15, 10, 55). Ultimately, subjectivity is confirmed in the “ultimate offering [of] oneself, or suffering in the offering of oneself” (1981, 54). The “I” in its full subjectivity cannot be egoistic. God did not first create a subject and then subsequently give it the freedom to choose to act morally or egoistically. Rather, God created a subject that was already moral: “The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being” (1969, 89). The “I” with full subjectivity does not *choose* to act as an ethical being; rather, it is only through putting itself into question in the face of the Other, that is, through being ethical, that one becomes an “I” with full subjectivity. The “I” with full subjectivity acts morally not in an active choice but in a passivity “more passive than all patience” (1981, 15). This “I” does not choose but is, in a sense, chosen or, as Levinas says, commanded by the Other to be “the first on the scene”; it is the other who “makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor” (1981, 11). Arguably, the sense of being chosen is analogous here to the anthropic principle. Just as in physics the anthropic principle challenges or displaces the fiction of a deracinate knower who is independent of all worlds and indifferently capable of knowing all worlds equally, so the work of Levinas challenges or displaces the fiction of a self-contained primordial “I” capable of giving or withholding itself by choice.

The “I” with full subjectivity, the ethical “I,” is a subject with a soul. We have seen that the structure of this “I” consists in its Desire for transcendence. As such, this “I” will be awakened by evil, precisely because transcendence is also part of the structure of evil. We have seen that evil is an excess, and the anguish at the heart of evil is “more radically negative than negation” (1998, 127). As such, it opens up a “horizon of nothingness” that is not the opposite of being. It signifies an end, but not an end on the same spectrum as some beginning. Rather, it is “an end that, in a very significant fashion, leads beyond; elsewhere than to being . . . elsewhere than to nothingness” (1998, 127). Thus, evil, as an excess and with anguish as its “qualitative essence,” announces the “modality” of “*non-integratableness* itself,” of the “not-finding-a-place, the refusal of any accommodation with. . .” (1998, 128). The “ex-” in the excess of evil points to an exteriority that is not any correlate of interiority; it is the “ex- of all exteriority” (1998, 128). Levinas goes on to emphasize: “*And in this sense [evil announces] transcendence!*” (1998, 128). Thus, Levinas flings a glove in the face of all our bright childish hopes and habits of linking transcendence with the supremely beautiful and finds the annunciation of transcendence in what most frustrates the sense-making

powers of mind, in what stands most perfectly over against the ego's claims and intentions. Transcendence is announced in that which cannot be conceptualized, thematized, and reduced to the categories of our own thought. Yet, paradoxically, this is neither utterly repellant to nor utterly destructive of the "I" who confronts it as a threat. For it is just this boundary, this separation, this limit, that confirms or validates distinctively human subjectivity in its fullest extension. With a Desire for transcendence, the "I" will be awakened by the evil that announces transcendence. It is for this reason that evil finds me and I am chosen for evil. This is how the intentionality of evil, the fact that it "reaches me as if it sought me," can be understood (1998, 129). Evil reaches me and searches for me when it is endured by all the others whom I face, all the others whose faces announce a radical otherness that is in the same order as exteriority, infinity, and transcendence. This is so because, as we have seen, the face of the sufferer, more than that of anyone else, "commands me and ordains me" as "the first on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor," as the chosen one, or the selected one (1981, 11). Clearly, then, there is a transcendence that links the structure of subjectivity with that of evil and thus confirms the "ethical anthropic principle."

4. God and Evil

There is evil in the world, just as there is cosmic fine tuning. In both cases, that which is not explainable is the condition of there being a demand for explanation. In neither case does the impossibility of explanation render the question (or the phenomenon) absurd or nonsensical. For in both cases, the subject encounters the limits of our capacity to answer "Why?" by reason of having arrived at the originary limits of thought itself. But in the case of ethics, the opaqueness of evil is the validation of responsibility, not its undoing. Given that there is evil, the only appropriate thing to do is to respond to it by trying to alleviate the pain and suffering. Evil brings home the urgency of responsibility, calling us to turn the useless suffering into a "non-useless suffering," that is, a suffering in the suffering of others (1988, 164).⁵ Coming across a victim of a violent act, the only appropriate thing to do is to render assistance, such as applying first aid or calling an ambulance. It is inappropriate to leave the victim lying there while one tries to find out who committed the deed

⁵ Geertz is also relevant here. Thus, "as a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable—something, as we say, sufferable. It was in this effort that the Ba-Illa woman . . . failed and, literally not knowing how to feel about what had happened to her, how to suffer, perished in confusion and despair" (Geertz 1975, 104).

and why. In the same way, evil calls for an ethical response. It does not call for a denial of God, nor a theodicy that tries to integrate evil. Evil selects, or seeks out, the ethical subject for a response. It is the bell that awakens the ethical subject to its responsibility to the Other. Constituted by responsibility, the ethical subject is selected for evil: recognizing it and responding to it ethically. This is the working out of the "ethical anthropic principle." God is nowhere present in this working out. Yet, it is precisely the ethical response to evil that confirms the very God that hides His face at the site of evil.

The response to evil consists in assuming responsibility for the Other as victim of evil. What is visible in the face of the Other is the trace of "irreducible alterity, the 'un-containable,' the Infinite or God" (1998, 50). When we reflect on the nature of our experience of the radical alterity of the Other, on the irresistible command that comes from the infinite saying, we cannot fail to appreciate the power and the glory of the saying, to look upon it "with awe and admiration," to borrow a phrase from Kant. If the name "God" or "the Infinite" designates a source of power and glory that is admirable and awesome, then it is an appropriate name for that which is insinuated in the experience of the Other. Thus, the "glory of the Infinite is glorified in [the] responsibility" that is the command to substitute oneself for the Other (1998, 50). In saying, "Here I am"—in being responsible for my neighbor—"I bear witness to the Infinite," not an Infinite that is "in front of" me, but "a thought behind thoughts . . . too lofty to push itself up front" (1981, 149). It is in this way that "the 'here I am' signifies me in the name of God" (1981, 149). It is in this way that to welcome the stranger, to share the food from one's mouth and the coat from one's shoulder, is really to say, "Here I am, in the name of God,' without referring myself directly to his presence" (1981, 149). In this way, claims Levinas, "the old biblical theme of man made in the image of God takes on a new meaning, but it is in the 'you' and not in the 'I' that this resemblance is announced" (1998, 148). To be sure, it is not the case that "the other man must be taken for God or that God, the Eternal Thou, be found simply in some extension of the You" (1998, 151). Rather, it is in my being hostage to a "you" that the word "God," "this immeasurable word[,] signifies for thought" (1998, 151).

For Levinas, then, the "very movement that leads to another leads to God" (1998, 148). It is neither the rational process of proving the existence of God nor the witnessing of God "in front of" me. As Levinas puts it, the subject as hostage "has been neither the experience nor the proof of the Infinite, but the witnessing of the Infinite, a modality of this glory, a witnessing that no disclosure has preceded" (1998, 73). Nevertheless, the God to whom I bear witness in being responsible for the victim of evil cannot fail to astonish me: "An astonishment like this does not depend on the 'quiddity' of that which astonishes, but on the *how* of the relation

to things” (1998, 40, emphasis in original). Specifically, it depends on my relation to the Other. Indeed, to wait to be astonished in a determinate way is to wait in vain, for the simple reason that “determinate waitings deceive, filled as they are by that which corresponds to a grasp and a *comprehension*” (1998, 50, emphasis in original), whereas that which astonishes can neither be grasped nor comprehended. By contrast, the time of responsibility is a time “as an awaiting—as patience, more passive than any passivity correlative of acts—[which] awaits the ungraspable” (1998, 50). The person who is religious in the Levinasian sense is not religious in the sense of addressing God in a religious language and in religious practices; the person who is religious in the Levinasian sense asks about the neighbor and tends to the victim of evil rather than asking for God, and in this asking and tending, he or she is really seeking God. Indeed, given Levinas’s arguments, it is in being responsible for the Other, not in determinately seeking God, that he or she manages to find Him. As Levinas puts it, the “word of the prophet (Isaiah 65:1) . . . expresses this admirably. ‘I am sought of them that asked not for me, I am found of them that sought me not’” (1998, 51).

From evil, we have come full circle back to God. The meaning of Isaiah 45:7 is embedded in the connection between the ethical response to evil and God, a connection that Levinas has clearly revealed in his phenomenology. With the help of the “ethical anthropic principle,” we can understand the *structure* of this connection. To take Isaiah 45:7 as a logical problem about the existence of a benevolent God in the midst of evil is to misunderstand its meaning. Only those who respond ethically to evil can properly understand it, and they will understand it as, in Levinas’s own words, a “breakthrough of the Good,” a breakthrough that “signifies the approach of an infinite God, an approach that is His proximity” (1998, 134).

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