

“INVINCIBLE GOODNESS”

Levinas on socio-political responsibility, its hither side and beyond, in dialogue with Vasily Grossman

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Introduction

In 1985 the novel *Life and Fate*¹ by the Russian-Jewish writer, Vasily Grossman (1905-1964)² appeared in the texts of Levinas (1905-1995),³ among others in a full

¹ V. GROSSMAN, *Life and Fate* (translated and with an introduction by Robert Chandler), London, Vintage, 2006. (Cited as G). Cf. infra note 6 on the Russian and French editions.

² A remarkable detail is that Levinas was born in the same year as Grossman, namely in 1905. Levinas saw the light of day, at least according to his Lithuanian identity card, on 30 December 1905 (Kovno, current day Kaunas, then still a part of Czarist Russia, where the Julian calendar was still used). According to the Gregorian calendar, 12 January 1906 was the date of birth of Levinas – the date that is found in many texts about Levinas. Vasily (officially Iosif Solomonovitch) Grossman was born on 12 December 1905 in Berdichev, Ukraine, then also part of Czarist Russia.

³ The cited studies of Levinas are listed below in alphabetical order. References and citations in our text are indicated with an abbreviation of the original French edition, along with the cited page or pages. The cited page(s) from the available English translation are indicated after the forward slash (/). Abbreviations used: AE: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, La Haye, Nijhoff, 1974. [English translation (ET): *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff (Kluwer), 1981.]; AS: *Autrement que savoir* (Interventions dans les Discussions & Débat général), Paris, Osiris, 1988; AT: *Altérité et transcendance*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1995. [ET: *Alterity and Transcendence*, translated by M.B. Smith, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999.]; AV: *L'an-dèlà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1982. [ET: *Beyond the Verse. Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, translated by G.D. MOLE, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994.]; BPW: *Emmanuel Levinas. Basic Philosophical Writings* (edited by A.T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, R. Bernasconi), Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996; CPP: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by A. Lingis, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster, Nijhoff Publishers (Kluwer), 1987; DEHH: *En décourrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1967 (2ème édition complétée); DL: *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1976 (2ème édition refondue et complétée). [ET: *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, translated by S. Hand, Baltimore (MA), The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.]; DMT: *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (Établissement du texte, notes et postface de J. Rolland), Paris, Grasset, 1993. [ET: *God, Death, and Time*, translated by B. Bergo, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2000.]; DO: *De l'oblitération* (Entretien avec Françoise Armengaud à propos de l'œuvre de Sacha Sosno), Paris, La Différence, 1990; DVI: *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Paris, Vrin, 1982. [ET: *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, translated by B. Bergo, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 1998.]; EE: *De l'existence à l'existant*, Paris, Vrin, 1978 (2nd ed.). [ET: *Existence and Existents*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague/Boston, Nijhoff, 1978.]; EFP: 'Entretiens,' in F. POIRIÉ, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, Lyon, La Manufacture, 1987, 62-136. [ET: 'Interview with François Poirié,' in IRB 23-83.]; EI: *Éthique et Infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, Paris, Fayard & France Culture, 1982. [ET: *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by R.A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1985.]; ELSA: R. BURGGRAEVE, *Emmanuel Levinas et la socialité de l'argent. Un philosophe en quête de la réalité journalière. La genèse de 'Socialité et argent' ou l'ambiguïté de l'argent*, Leuven, Peeters, 1997; EN: *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris, Grasset, 1991. [ET: *Entre nous. Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by M.B. Smith & B. Harshav, London/New York, Continuum, 2006.]; EPA: 'Entretien préparatoire avec Emmanuel Levinas sur l'argent, l'épargne et le prêt (le 10 avril 1986 à Paris chez Levinas), in: ELSA 31-67; HAH: *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1972. [ET: *Humanism of the Other*, translated by N. Poller, Urbana & Chicago, University

of Illinois Press, 2003.]; HN: *À l'heure des nations* (Lectures talmudiques, essais et entretiens), Paris, Minuit, 1988. [ET: *At the Time of the Nations*, translated by M.B. Smith, London, Athlone, 1995]; HS: *Hors sujet*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1987. [ET: *Outside the Subject*, translated by M.B. Smith, London, Athlone, 1993.]; I: 'Ideology and Idealism' (followed by discussion), in M. FOX (ed.), *Modern Jewish Ethics*, Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 1975, 121-138; IH: *Les imprévus de l'histoire*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1994. [ET: *Unforeseen History*, translated by N. Poller, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2003.]; IRB: *Is It Righteous to Be. Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by J. Robbins and translated by J. Robbins, M. Coelen, with T. Loebel, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2001; LAV: "L'au-delà du verset." Un entretien avec Emmanuel Levinas (à propos de Mère Teresa)," in L. BALBONT, *Mère Teresa en notre âme et conscience. Entretiens*, Paris, Nouvelle Cité, 1982, 121-138; LC: *Liberté et commandement*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1994. [ET: 'Freedom and Command,' in CPP 15-23.]; LPI: 'La philosophie et l'idée de l'Infini,' in DEHH 165-178. [ET: 'Philosophy and the idea of Infinity,' in CPP 47-60.]; NA: 'Au nom d'autrui' (entretien avec Luc Ferry, Raphaël Hadas-Lebel, Sylviane Pasquier), in *L'Express*, 1990, 13 juillet, 60-66; NLT: *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1996. [ET: *New Talmudic Readings*, translated by R. A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1999.]; NP: *Noms propres* (Essais), Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1976. [ET: *Proper Names*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 1996.]; NTR: *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by A. Aronowicz, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990; PO: 'Portrait – Emmanuel Levinas se souvient...' (en dialogue avec Myriam Anissimov), in *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, 21 (1985), nr. 82, 30-35. [ET: 'Interview with Myriam Anissimov,' included in IRB 84-92.]; RA: 'Entretien' (propos recueillis par Laurent Adert et Jean-Christophe Aeschlimann, février 1985), in J.-C. AESCHLIMANN (réd.), *Répondre d'autrui: Emmanuel Levinas*, Neuchâtel, Éditions de la Baconnière, 1989, 9-16; SA: *Socialité et argent*, in: ELSA 79-85. [E.T.: 'Sociality and Money,' in R. BURGGRAEVE, *Proximity with the Other. A Multidimensional Ethic of Responsibility in Levinas*, Bangalore (India), Dharmaram Publications, 2009, 115-123.]; SaS: *Du sacré au Saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1977. [ET: in NTR 89-197, entitled 'From the Sacred to the Holy.']; SD: 'Le surlendemain des dialectiques,' in *Hamoré*, 13 (1970), nr. 50, 38-40; TA: *Le temps et l'autre*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1979 (2nd ed.). [ET: *Time and the Other*, translated by R.A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1987.]; TH: 'Transcendence et hauteur' (suivi de 'Discussion' & 'Correspondance'), in LC 49-100. [ET: 'Transcendence and Height' (followed by 'Discussion' & 'Correspondence'), in BPW 11-31.]; TI: *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, La Haye, Nijhoff, 1961. [ET: *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff, 1979.]; TrID: *Transcendence et intelligibilité* (suivi d'un *Entretien*), Genève, Labor et Fides, 1984, 33-68 (Entretien avec Emmanuel Levinas: 2 juin 1983, Genève). [ET:

paragraph of a Talmudic reading ‘Beyond Memory,’ which he delivered in December 1985 on ‘Mémoire et histoire’ [*Memory and History*], the 25th ‘Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française’ in Paris.⁴ From that period on, mainly in interviews,⁵ Levinas refers to Grossman’s novel of which he says: “The great book that impressed me a lot, I have to say, is the book by Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, translated from the Russian, which I read in Russian” (EFP 133/80).⁶

‘Discussion following ‘Transcendence and Intelligibility’ (1984),’ in IRB 268-286; VA: ‘La vocation de l’autre’ (interview by Emmanuel Hirsch), in E. HIRSCH, *Racismes. L’autre et son visage*, Paris, Cerf, 1988, 89-102. [ET: ‘The Vocation of the Other,’ translated by J. Robbins, in IRB 105-113.].

⁴ E. LEVINAS, ‘Au-delà du souvenir. Leçon talmudique,’ in J. HALPÉRIN & G. LEVITTE (éds.), *Mémoire et histoire. Données et débats*, Paris, Denoël, 1986, 159-175. Included in HN 89-105/76-91, in particular 101-105/88-91.

⁵ ‘Portrait – Emmanuel Levinas se souvient...’ (en dialogue avec Myriam Anissimov, 1985), in: *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, 21(1985), nr. 82, 30-35, in particular 33-34 (included in IRB 84-92, in particular 89-90); ‘Entretien’ (propos recueillis par Laurent Adert et Jean-Christophe Aeschlimann, février 1985), in RA 9-16, in particular 15-16; ‘Entretien préparatoire avec Emmanuel Levinas sur l’argent, l’épargne et le prêt, le 10 avril 1986 à Paris),’ in ELSA 31-67, in particular 46-47; ‘Entretiens Emmanuel Levinas François Poirié,’ in EFP 61-136/23-83, in particular 132-135/79-81; ‘La proximité de l’autre’ (entretien avec Anne-Catherine Benchelah, 1986), in AT 108-119/97-109, in particular 116-118/106-109; ‘L’autre, utopie et justice’ (entretien avec J.M & J.R. de la revue ‘Autrement,’ 1988), in EN 253-264/193-202, in particular 260-262/199-201; ‘La vocation de l’autre’ (entretien avec Emmanuel Hirsch, 1988), in VA 89-102/105-113, in particular 92-106; *De l’oblitération* (entretien avec Françoise Armengaud à propos de l’oeuvre de Sacha Sosno), in DO 7-32, in particular 20; ‘Au nom d’autrui’ (entretien avec Luc Ferry, Raphaël Hadas-Lebel, Sylviane Pasquier), in NA 60-66, in particular 61-62.

⁶ When Grossman – too optimistic about the ‘openness’ (the gradual thaw and ‘de-Stalinisation’) of the former Soviet regime (under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, the successor of Stalin) – offered his book for publication in 14 February 1961, the original manuscript, all typed-out copies, the draft versions and the notes to his work (written in the 1950s and completed in 1960) were confiscated in order to be destroyed. By force, Grossman had to

When in his famous interview (April-May 1986) François Poirié asked Levinas who as an intellectual has ‘charmed’ him in the years from 1945 till then, he names among various others Grossman: “Outside the masters of phenomenology, I read first of all the texts into which M. [Monsieur] Shoshani initiated me,⁷ that seemed to me much

accompany the KGB agents to the other places in the city where copies of the work were kept. At his secretary’s home, even the carbon paper and the typewriter ribbon with which the book had been typed out were confiscated (HN 101-102/88). His daughter, Katya Korotkova, called it “the arrest of a book” (M. KRIELAARS, *Alles voor het moederland*, Amsterdam/Antwerp, Atlas Contact, 2007, 104). Everything had to be destroyed, as if the book had never been written! Even a letter to the party leader, Khrushchev, wherein Grossman presented his book as a part of Khrushchev’s politics of de-Stalinisation, did not help. He did not get the manuscript back and had to sign a declaration that he would prevent the book from being published abroad as well. And yet this happened, as if by miracle. Before Grossman sent a typed-out copy of his work to the Soviet authorities, he had also given at the insistence of friends a copy to his friend Lipkin. The latter – via Vladimir Voinovic, the dissident writer – requested the assistance of Andrei Sacharov, the dissident nuclear physicist, who then saw to it that two microfilms of the work were made and were smuggled abroad. One microfilm landed in Switzerland, where it was published as a book both in Russian as well as in French: *Vie et destin* (translated from the Russian by Alexis Beredowitch, with the collaboration of Anne Coldefy-Faucard, with a preface by Efim Ekind), Lausanne, Éditions de l’Age d’Homme, 1980. The work also appeared later with: Paris-Lausanne, Julliard, L’Age d’Homme, 1983 and as a ‘livre de poche’ in 1987 with: Paris, Presses Pochet. A second, published and presumably lost copy of the book – a copy that Grossman had given for safekeeping to a childhood friend – was only discovered later: for 27 years, it lay in a shopping bag on the coat hanger in the small provincial town of Maloyaroslavets in Russia at the home of that childhood friend, Vjatsjelav Loboda. This integral, not ‘purified’ version appeared in the Soviet Union only in 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, thanks to the ‘perestroika’ of Mikhail Gorbachev (M. KRIELAARS, *Op. cit.*, 321-327).

⁷ In his autobiographical article ‘Signature’ Levinas qualifies him as “the prestigious – and merciless – teacher of exegesis and of Talmud” (DL 337/291). Levinas encountered this ‘teacher’ thanks to his lifelong friend, doctor

more important. I have memories of Léon Brunschvicg, but there has also been Blanchot, Jean Wahl, Ricoeur, Derrida, and also Vasily Grossman and the Israeli novelist S.Y. Agnon..." (EFP 132/79).

Levinas' interest in the book of Grossman is not that of a literary academic or historian, concerned about an objective-scientific report on the origin, background and content of the book. His interest, rather, was that of a philosopher immersed in the full range of his thought. His reading is coloured and also limited. It does not pay attention to certain aspects of the work of Grossman like his view on Christianity or on the antisemitism of Stalin and his regime, his view on freedom in a collectivistic context,⁸ his critical presentation and recurring reflection on the Stalinistic 'gulag system' as a unique form of rationality and scientificity and as a test for a future model of society, but also as a paradigm of the totalitarian reality.⁹ His reading and interpretation thus take place from the perspective of his own thought on the face, responsibility and society. Without neglecting to take Grossman's book itself at hand, we join in with Levinas' reading by searching concretely for the way in

(gynaecologist) Henri Nerson, after the Second World War in Paris (EFP 136/82-83). Cf. also: EFP 125-130/73-78.

⁸ J. ROLLAND, 'Vassili Grossman. Ce qu'il y a d'humain en l'homme. À propos de 'Vie et destin,' in *Esprit*, 370(1989), nr. 6, 777-790, in particular 784-789.

⁹ L. ANCKAERT, 'Goodness without witnesses. Vasily Grossman and Emmanuel Levinas,' in A. COOLS (ed.), *Levinas, Law and Literature*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2018. Cf. G Part III Chapter 56, 828-830.

which he has recognised resonances of his thought in the masterpiece of Grossman, and especially how these resonances have helped him to focus on certain aspects of his thought, in particular on the relationship between society and ethics. Thus, we are enabled to better understand and do justice to Levinas himself. In an introductory first part of our article, we present how he, from his vision on ‘being’ and ‘otherwise than being,’ searches for an alternative foundation for society, going entirely beyond Thomas Hobbes. In a second movement, Levinas sets us, starting with the ‘third party,’ on the track of the ethical necessity of justice and the state. At the same time, he lets us see its dark side. It is precisely there that Grossman makes his entrance with his growing suspicion towards Stalin’s totalitarian regime of the ‘Good’ that is transformed into its own opposite. In a third movement, again inspired by Grossman, we will make explicit how Levinas surpasses every social and political regime by means of, among others, human rights as ‘rights of the vulnerable other’ and by means of the ‘small goodness.’ Finally, it will become apparent how this small goodness is no ‘funny love’ but a leverage not to be belittled that lifts the socio-political system above itself ‘into the Infinite,’ whereby it acquires not only a socio-ethical but also a religious significance.

1. Are people wolves to each other or responsible for each other?

Levinas explicitly poses the question whether state, society, law and power are required because people are wolves to their fellow human beings, or because they are responsible for each other (DMT 211-212/183). The question literally goes: “It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of a limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *for one another*. Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequence of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man?” (EI 85/80). In short, does the socio-political order arise from the restriction of violence or from the definition of man’s responsibility (I 137-138)?

1.1. A self-interested model of society

For a correct understanding of this question, which seems a dilemma between two alternatives, we find a starting point in Levinas’ second major work ‘Otherwise than being’ (*Autrement qu’être*) (1974). From the beginning, he distinguishes between ‘being’ and ‘otherwise than being,’ a distinction that at the same time introduces a field of tension and a dynamism. On the level of nature, which he also calls the ontological or the dynamism of ‘being’ in and through

every being, Levinas determines, entirely in line with Hobbes—and with Spinoza, Darwin and Heidegger—that all beings are driven by the law of being itself, meaning to say by the urge to be, to persevere in this being, and also to develop it. In the sixth proposition of the third part of his Ethics, Spinoza expresses it as follows: “Every being makes every effort insofar as it is in it to persevere in its being” (NP 104/71). Every being, even the human being, is an ‘attempt at being’—‘conatus essendi.’ According to Darwin, every living being is ‘inspired’ by the urge of the ‘struggle for life,’ that consists not so much in being strong but in being clever, meaning to say adapting oneself constantly and as efficiently as possible to changing threats and opportunities. According to Heidegger, the being of the human *Dasein* is about an attempt in the ‘sein-zum-Tode’ (existing-toward-death; being-for-death) to arrive at a ‘unique’ or authentic existence, whereby the human person raises the everyday banality of ‘das Man’ (one) to heroic heights, or rather surpasses it. Even Karl Marx has described the human person as ‘self-production’ thanks to labour as transformation of the world: ‘Selbstproduktion durch Weltproduktion.’ And thus, we can continue with still other authors, not only philosophers but also poets, novelists, essayists... In short, in one’s ‘spontaneous nature’ the human person, at least at first sight, is marked by the self-interest of an unavoidable egoism that entirely is not perverse but on the contrary healthy and ‘normal,’ precisely because the human person cannot but

engage in the struggle against one's own finitude and fragility. Our 'being' is 'interest' (*intéressement*): "*Esse is interesse*" (AE 4/4).

This human self-interest applies not only towards the world—as economics—but is extended as well to other humans, who are driven and propelled by the same natural urge of the 'attempt at being.' And precisely because all people are moved by the same self-interested urge, Hobbes says they come to stand as 'wolves' towards each other. On the basis of their shared self-interest, they form a threat to each other that ends up in the drama of the 'war of all against all': "the violence of war is the prolongation of the pure persisting in being" (VA 98/111). Unless... unless they come to an agreement with each other to constrain their mutual violence, precisely on the basis of the reciprocal advantage that they can thereby achieve: a reciprocally well-understood self-interest as armistice and peace on the basis of good common sense. 'If you are too greedy, you easily lose the entire lot': a realistic wisdom of 'common sense.' According to Hobbes, the original violence via the egocentric common sense of people who cannot stand each other leads to the pragmatic, utilitarian insight that peace is better than violence. One discovers that the agreement to 'grant' each other in interchangeable arrangements a reasonable domain for one's own attempt at being is more reasonable than to keep on fighting with each other. For that purpose, according to Hobbes, a strong authority is

then necessary that can ‘enforce’ this peace, which implies that self-interested people have to be prepared to relegate a part of their power to the common authority of the state as ‘Leviathan’... This enforced submission does cost something, perhaps much more than what we expected, but it undoubtedly brings along its own advantages, among others that we need not constantly live in fear and trembling for our acquired and circumscribed, reasonable self-development. Utilitarian freedom is always better than violence and war (EFP 118/68).

1.2. The risks of the self-interested model of society

According to Levinas, upon closer inspection, this Hobbesian view—or similar notions—also has a number of serious disadvantages. These risks precisely lead him to seek for another foundation for human—or better, humane—society.

Levinas sees the most fundamental disadvantage in the fact that, when looked upon more closely, the choice of a Hobbesian view inadvertently keeps on legitimising the Nazi-ideology. After all, this ideology is anchored in an ‘axiology of the will of being,’ namely by resisting—in line with Nietzsche—against a ‘slave morality’ and subscribing to a ‘lord morality,’ namely to the national-socialist image of the human person of being bodily anchored in ‘blood and soil’ that develops oneself into a ‘Wille zur Macht’ and an exuberant ‘life urge,’ meaning to say into a ‘glorious

perseverance in being.’ It is precisely this life-will that elevates one’s own uniqueness at the cost of others, namely those who are ‘different’ (AS 60).

All the other disadvantages that now follow must also be read in this light. First of all, the achieved peace is not reliable. After all, it keeps holding to self-interest, for that urge is in itself not questioned, only restricted and contained: “the persisting in being, interest, is maintained” (AE 5/4-5). Hence, the dissatisfaction regarding what one has had to surrender remains slumbering underneath that negotiated peace. Hence as well, violence can again break out if the achieved balance is violated or—slowly or suddenly—brought out of balance, whereby the one or the other party feels treated unfairly.

Another disadvantage of the ‘bargained peace’ is that that peace is usually reached by first organising a ‘war against war’ in order thus afterwards to be able to put sufficient weight in the negotiating scale. Moreover, the secondary violence against the original violence still remains a violence that precisely assures itself of a good conscience as the ‘unrelenting struggle against unrelenting terror’ (EFP 118/68). Thus, the hardness of violence is clothed with reason and plausibility whereby one’s own violence is still hardly seen as violence unless as an acceptable ‘collateral damage’ (cf. also *infra*).

Last but not least, it is clear to Levinas that the reciprocity of the utilitarian rationality of self-interested beings that

threaten each other with the irrationality of violence, lose sight of those who are most vulnerable. The mutual, well-understood self-interest that exceeds the war of all against all, presupposes indeed self-interested beings who can make themselves count not only during the battle but also during the negotiations (with or without diplomacy and cunning—‘if you are not physically strong, you have to be clever’). But what happens to those who are utterly vulnerable and defenceless, those who cannot yet or no longer make themselves count...? In this regard Levinas points out how history all too often, and with manifest obviousness, recounts particularly the story of the winners where there is little or no room for the losers unless ‘as losers.’ Don’t the victims in historiography become even more victims since they again function according to how the ‘survivors’ interpret and utilize the ‘works of the dead’ (TI 26/55)? “Historiography recounts the way the survivors appropriate the works of dead wills to themselves; it rests on the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts enslavement; forgetting the life that struggles against slavery” (TI 204/228).

1.3. From ‘being’ to ‘otherwise than being’: the soul of our humanity

Just for the sake of those who are utterly vulnerable, Levinas finds it necessary—not only factually but especially ethically—to find another ‘soul and inspiration’ for a

humane society. Rather a society wherein not the mighty—the competitive and the combative—‘I’s’ form the starting point, but the vulnerable others. Levinas literally says: “I try to deduce the necessity and the meaning of the socio-political order from the very exigencies of the ‘face-to-face’ inter-subjectivity. The political must be able always to be checked and criticized starting from the ethical” (EI 85/80), namely the face of the other and our responsibility for the other (AS 60).

Here, Levinas opens up the perspective on the ‘otherwise than being,’ namely a different movement than self-interest, which also leads him to a redefinition of the subject. At first sight, the ‘I’ is entirely attempt-at-being and self-interest, but upon closer inspection, there is in the depths of the ‘I’ another movement at work, namely a movement that takes the ‘I’ outside of itself towards the other. He also calls it an ‘ensoulment’ of being by the otherwise than being, in the sense that the ‘I’ is attuned to the other than oneself. And this elicits in Levinas the almost mystical comment that the other is our ‘soul’: “the other in the same [self]” (AE 141/111). With the first, spontaneous and obvious description of the ‘I’ as ‘attempt-at-being’ we have apparently looked over something or lost sight of something, whereby we—just like Hobbes and others—have reduced the human to its ‘dynamism of being.’ In the depths of being, however, Levinas discovers something else, namely the being dedicated to the other in spite of oneself. The self-interested being of the human

person is no flawless being, but a traumatised one. In the rest of being that is concerned about its own being, there lives—hidden and often kept out—a remarkable unrest, a scruple—literally a pebble in the shoe—whereby the self-complacent turning inwards into oneself is turned outwards into an ‘extra-versive’ dedication to the other than oneself, namely the other for the sake of the other. Here Levinas recognises the Platonic idea of ‘*epékeina tès ousias*’ (*beyond Essence*) as the ‘Good beyond being’ that is made concrete in the ethical relationship with the other (EE 8/15, AE 3/3). The human subject is, in other words, more complex than it seems at first sight. It is literally an ‘ambiguous’ being. At first sight, it appears simply as an attempt-at-being, but upon closer inspection – by means of retracing our steps (comparable to the phenomenological reduction of Husserl ‘zu den Sachen selbst’—‘to the real thing’)—we discover above its primary nature its second nature, namely its connectedness in spite of itself to the other than itself, the unique other. That is the true and most original being of the human person, even though it is only discovered in a second instance, and even though in concrete reality it can never be substantiated without a struggle with and a surpassing of one’s own attempt-at-being, literally ‘dis-interest-edness’: ‘Umwertung aller Werte’—the turning over of the subject up-to-infinity (AE 6/6). In this regard, the human person goes about with a permanent trauma: vulnerability—not fragility, which displays its finitude—and thus touchability (*sensibilité*), that expresses its infinity (AE 17-19/14-15).

Not only can we call this the ‘hither side’ of the subject (‘prior to freedom’), but also of the socio-political order (‘prior to politics’). Before it can go beyond the political, a recurrence is first needed, a backward movement towards its ‘birthplace’ and source. Namely the ‘otherwise than being’ of the responsibility-by-and-for-other (AE 55/43).

1.4. The vulnerable face: The bent back of the other before me (Grossman)

We shall now further make explicit how being touchable—and being touched—by the naked face of the other is made concrete on the basis of Levinas’ phenomenology of the encounter with the face of the other. The other is not only an ‘other-I’ that is driven by an attempt-at-being like mine, but an other that reveals itself precisely in its epiphany as ‘radically different.’ It doesn’t stand beside but in front of me as the face that looks at me and addresses me. The other is ‘face’ insofar as that other breaks through its form and physiognomy and directs itself straight at me: ‘face-to-face’ (*face-à-face*). That is the exact English (and French) translation of the Hebrew ‘panim’—a plural form without a singular. I have no face, only a countenance, when I look in the mirror. I am only a face thanks to the face of the other in front of me, who looks at me through the nakedness of its eye and directs itself toward me through its speech. Without speaking about me, the other speaks to me, just as I call upon the other as ‘you’ (TI 41/68, 45/73). Levinas also calls this the radical separation and transcendence of the other.

This is apparent from the fact that the face is an ‘expression,’ namely the ‘revelation’ of its otherness itself: it is not the *what* but the *that* of such alterity which is first expressed by the face and shared to me, in and through its spoken word or in its wordlessness... This irreducibility-before-me is also its strength and sublimity—Levinas calls it its ‘holiness’ and ‘divinity’—whereby the face is likewise the context where the idea of God as Other *par excellence* comes to mind (TI 273/297).

At the same time, the other is weak and vulnerable. For its irreducibility is nakedness. It is not clothed with qualities that make it equal to me and thus ‘valuable.’ It surpasses all qualities, similarities and differences. The other is ‘without context’ and precisely thus is the face in its sublimity also small, which Levinas calls “strangeness-destitution” (TI 47/75). The other is naked, deprived, landless, the poor, the widow, the orphan and the foreigner... insofar as they as ‘other’ fall outside my horizon and world. The face reveals to me the other as essentially ‘strange,’ namely as deprived and ‘nowhere home,’ and precisely for that reason so vulnerable, so defenceless and lonely, subjected to hunger and thirst and suffering.

Hence, Levinas discovers the shameful nakedness of the face not only in that the face is literally uncovered and exposed. In Grossman, he finds an unerring evocation of that nakedness in the people waiting in line in a gloomy room of the infamous Lubyanka prison in Moscow. In that prison, innumerable people were interrogated, locked up,

tortured and executed by the Stalin regime (NA 61-62).¹⁰ At one small opening, intended as a window, the people, in particular the women, came lining up to inquire about someone or “to convey letters and packages to friends and relatives attested for ‘political crimes’” (EN 262/201)¹¹ and where those who were ‘new arrivals’ firmly got the same

¹⁰ In his story ‘Mama’ (1960), Grossman describes the daily mass-executions in Lubyanka prison, as well as in two other equally infamous horror prisons in Moscow, the Lefortovo and the Butyrka. See M. KRIELAARS, *Op. cit.*, 17: “Day and night the transport trains rode to Komi, to Kolyma, to Norilsk, to Magadan and the bay of Nagyevo. Every day at dawn, the bodies of those who were executed in the dungeons were transported away in closed wagons.”

¹¹ G 668 (Part III, Chapter 23): “Most people were sentenced under article 58-10: Counter-Revolutionary Agitation, or not keeping their mouths shut. ... There had been arrests just before the first of May, there were always a lot just before public holidays... .” At the peak of the ‘Great Terror,’ namely between August 1937 and November 1938, two million Soviet citizens were arrested in the Soviet Union. At least 700,000 of them were condemned without any form of due process. “In 1937 alone, almost 40,000 inhabitants of the Soviet capital were executed by means of a shot in the neck in the dungeons of Lubyanka on the grounds of fabricated accusations of counter-revolutionary activities, treason and espionage” (M. KRIELAARS, *Op. cit.*, 109). Likewise in Grossman we read the following: “He [Katsenelenbogen] told of how, in 1937, they had executed people sentenced without right of correspondence every night. The chimneys of the Moscow crematoria had sent up clouds of smoke into the night, and the members of the Communist youth organization enlisted to help with the executions and subsequent disposal of the bodies had gone mad” (G 827). “The murder of innocent citizens became a normal affair. The individual meant nothing anymore. One was crushed, just as a fly would be. (...) Between 1929 and 1953, around 28.7 million Soviet citizens were locked up in camps or in exile. Around 2.7 million of them died.” (M. KRIELAARS, *Op. cit.*, 113-114). On the way in which “those who didn’t bow down before the new age were thrown on the scrapheap”, Grossman writes: “He knew now how a man could be split apart. After you’ve been searched, after you’ve had your buttons ripped off and your spectacles confiscated, you look on yourself as a physical nonentity. And then in the investigator’s office you realize that the role you played in in the Revolution and the Civil War means nothing, that all your work and all your knowledge is just so much rubbish. You are indeed a nonentity – and not just physically” (G 826).

answer: “Parcel not accepted” (G 667). People discover the face in the shy, curved necks of the one standing waiting in front of them. A bent back can say more than the naked face that can still be beautiful and ruddy and unhurt, as can be read in Grossman and cited by Levinas: “A woman waits for her turn: ‘Never had she thought the human’s back could be so expressive and transmit states of mind so penetratingly. The people who approached the window had a special way of stretching the neck and back; the raised shoulders had shoulder-blades tensed as if by springs, they seemed to shout, to cry, to sob.’” (AT 146-147/140 - G 669). The face of the other is not their seductive beauty, their painted and wrinkle-free complexion, but their fearful, evasive gaze, their wrinkled faces and their deterioration, up to their being surrendered to the ultimate enemy, death, that can be inflicted by the ‘civil servant’—or a representative of the regime—just like that... The word ‘face’ thus has no literal nor ‘material’ significance, but a metaphorical or ‘meta-physical’ one (EN 262/201). In and through their injured bodiliness, the other reveals its vulnerability and affectability, its utter unsafety and uncertainty, its unrelenting exposure (AT 114/104). “There are different ways of being face. Without mouth, eyes or nose, the arm or the hand of Rodin’s sculptures are already face. The bent backs of the ones waiting in line in Lubyanka prison make us think of the erased, obliterated faces (*les visages oblitérés*) of Sacha Sosno. I think that Sosno, who replaces the face with

an empty square or a hole, evokes the same meaning of the face precisely through that brutal negativity” (DO 20).

1.5. Responsibility begins as shuddering

It is precisely this staggering weakness and vulnerability of the face of the other challenging my attempt-at-being that invites and tempts it, as it were, to grab the other, to subjugate and despise it, in short ‘to kill’ it (EI 90/86). Indeed, killing knows many forms: you can kill the other by robbing them of life, and you can kill the other by neglecting, humiliating or abusing the other... “Killing does not signify merely plunging a knife into the breast of the neighbour. Of course, it signifies that, too. But so many ways of being comport a way of crushing the other” (EFP 99-100/53). In murder, Levinas discovers the passion of annihilation or “unlimited negation” (TI 200/225, 209/232), of which the Holocaust (AT 139/132), genocide (HN 165/141) and terrorism (NP 9/3) are its extreme incarnations. But you can also deny the other and leave them alive, just as it occurs in torture (LC 33/16), hatred (TI 216/239), racism (VA 98/110) and anti-Semitism (DL 210/159), tyranny (LC 31/16), or all sorts of direct or indirect, brutal or subtle, forms of intimidation, imperialism, exploitation and power abuse (AT 139/132). You can absorb the other by reducing the other into an object for your own usefulness or interest. Sometimes the other then becomes a “servile soul” that experiences the situation as no

more than a slap in the face (LC 31-33/16-17). In the words of Levinas: “all the slow and invisible killing committed in our desires and vices, in all the innocent cruelties of natural life, in our indifference of ‘good conscience’ to what is far and what is near, even in the haughty obstinacy of our objectifying and our thematising, in all the consecrated injustices due to our atomic weight of individuals and the equilibrium of our social orders” (HN 128/110-111).

Paradoxically, however, the weakness of the other that is manifested in the ‘temptation to kill’ also reveals at the same time a unique and surprising strength of the other. Concretely, this ‘strength of weakness’ is apparent in the resistance of the face against all forms of violence and killing. This is indeed not about a physical strength but an ethical force, powerless and stubborn at the same time (TI 173/199). What is possible factually, is not allowed ethically. Through its weakness, the face is at the same time the strength of the prohibition: “Thou shalt not kill” (EN 212/165). And from there ensues that the encounter with the face begins as a ‘shudder,’ i.e. as restraint in the approach. Just as the ‘frikè’ or ‘shuddering’ in eros, according to Plato in the *Phaedrus* (AE 105/84, 110/87): the hand that approaches the sensual body of the other—and through the sensuality of the naked body, is seduced to grab and seize—hesitates in its approach and restrains itself. The seductive other is at the same time “horrifying.” That likewise applies ethically: the vulnerable nakedness of the face that attracts me to ‘grab’

(and to ‘grasp’), awakens in my forward-looking and subtle-brutal approach a shuddering that makes me withdraw. In the approach, I am roused to caution, so that in coming near I do not suffocate the other but, on the contrary, acknowledge and confirm the other in its being-other (NLT 95-96/125-126).¹²

1.6. The ethical ‘approach’ of the other

This confirmation-in-and-through-hesitation not only forms the space for respect and acknowledgement as ‘doing justice to the other’ (TI 62/90) but also for the goodness that assists and promotes the other. This goodness embodies itself effectively as “Work” (HAH 41/26), that spans over an entire spectrum of ‘works,’ starting from a first benediction of saying ‘good morning’ or ‘hello’ (*bonjour*) (AT 109/98) and the “small élan of courtesy” of “the ‘*après vous*’ [after you] before an open door, up to the disposition—hardly possible, but holiness demands it—to die for the other” (EFP 93/47): respect and acknowledgement of the irreducible otherness of the other (justice in the broad sense) (TI 62/72), proximity and “radical generosity” (HAH 41/27)

¹² A paradoxical example of this ethical shudder can be found in Grossman’s story ‘Through the eyes of Chekhov,’ which appeared in 1943 in the Red Star, and that later appeared along with 12 other reports from 1943 under the title ‘Stalingrad.’ The said story “was about a sharpshooter in Stalingrad, Anatoly Chekhov, who whenever he pulled the trigger to shoot down his enemies always experienced a moment of hesitation. It is a moment of compassion that gradually wears out. That hesitation to kill a person in cold blood makes the sharpshooter human” (M. KRIELAARS, *Op. cit.*, 99-120).

full of “insatiable compassion” (HAH 46/30), not letting the other alone in the hour of death (EI 128/119) as “the very perfection of love” (EFP 106/58). This notion of the good cannot be confused with happiness (EFP 116/66): “I think it is the discovery of the foundation of our humanity, the very discovery of the good in the meeting of the other. I’m not afraid of the word good, the responsibility for the other is the good. It’s not pleasant, it is good” (EFP 92/46–47).

All these—and other—‘works’ give shape to the ‘otherwise than being,’ for which Levinas seeks as the foundation of a humane society. It incarnates our ethical condition. It presupposes, as was already mentioned, the human condition of ‘selflessness,’ namely our being involved in spite of ourselves in the well-being of the other. Levinas also calls it the ‘creatureliness’ or the ‘createdness’ of ‘brotherhood’ (AE 148/116): being connected to each other, in spite of ourselves, even before we can connect to each other via all sorts of contracts and agreements (AE 109/87). By means of the practice of our heteronomous responsibility, we incarnate our own ethical being and we thus become who we are: a proximity, without making reciprocity a condition—for that would reduce the brotherhood to utilitarianism (HAH 42:27). It is also this ethical brotherhood (AE 109/87) that as a “proximity never close enough”—“closer and closer” (AE 103/82)—sets us on the track towards God, thanks to its infinitude as goodness: ‘unto-God’ (*à-Dieu*) (AE 14-15/12).

2. The socio-political order: its positive meaning and tragedy

Now that we have discovered with Levinas the ethical ‘hither side’ and foundation for a humane society in the ‘otherwise than being,’ we must take a step further and make explicit what this means for society itself. From the very beginning, we made clear how a remarkable paradox will turn up time and again, namely how the good—or rather, a concrete shape of the social and political good—is pursued by its own shadow and can even be turned into its own opposite. It is precisely in that ‘uneasy intrigue’ of ‘the evil of the good’ that Levinas has picked up certain insights from Grossman’s novel *Life and Fate* and reworked them. It is not because a humane society finds, or rather ‘must’ find, its foundation, starting point and inspiration in the responsibility of the one for the other that everything then becomes simple and straightforward. On the contrary, a humane society is a complex reality, as will become apparent, with all sorts of pitfalls and challenges that are not to be solved in a bout of enthusiasm nor in a ‘pious’ or ‘altruistic’ sleight of hand.

2.1. From the ‘third party’ to justice and its shadow

Our ‘phenomenology’ of the humane society starts with a commonplace fact. On the one hand, I am responsible for the unique other before me, but on the other, the two of us are not alone in the world. We are not a duo, or rather as a

duo we do not detach ourselves from the reality within which we are involved with each other. Adam and Eve were alone with just the two of them in the earthly paradise, which you could call the magic of the myth. But that myth hides its own imaginary deceit, for it does not reflect the complex reality wherein Adam and Even must operate... as will become apparent later, with all its problems (think but of Cain and Abel, the tower of Babel, the flood...). People are plural: ten, hundred, thousand, million, literally “everyone” (*Tout le monde*) (EFP 97/50). That is the real and only “true society,” which surpasses the “intimate society of the I-You” (EN 32/17) and sheds light on the abstraction of the face-to-face (EN 32/17). Hence, Levinas also speaks of “the excellence of the multiple” (EN 131/96).

Human plurality immediately obscures the original face-to-face, where everything is straightforward and pure: the one is entirely—infinately—responsible for the one, unique other. From the moment that we are with many, the shadow-side of the good appears. Our plurality makes our original responsibility into an ethical problem. If I take up my responsibility for the one other when it presents itself, I exclude inadvertently the others. That is the first, painful tragedy of the face-to-face: the choice for the uniqueness of the other unintentionally leads to the exclusion of all other others. The first goodness also becomes the first negligence, which is precisely the shadow that appears at the back of the lightened front-side of responsibility, stronger still that is

inextricably pulled along with the side facing the sun. Hence, the ethical necessity presents itself to correct the original responsibility, meaning to say not only to substantiate it before the one other but also before the other others. The non-simultaneity and asymmetry of goodness must become the simultaneity and symmetry of all (EFP 97/51). I can only surpass the evil of the original imbalance of the one-for-the-unique-other by means of introducing a balanced approach to everyone as ‘each-other’s-equals.’ This implies that we are going to compare the many people with each other, and thus that we will need to place people, who in principle are incomparable as unique beings – singular in their kind, ‘hapax’—on the same footing: a synchrony, “a comparison between incomparables” (AE 20/16). Every-*one* is just like everyone! The first evil of the good invites us, in other words, to think and to reflect, that we namely ‘account for’ the problem that ‘humanity’ as ‘everyone’ poses to us. We are challenged to confront and to judge, to weigh up, and to bring people in their radical difference under one denominator: just people-as-everyone (DMT 211/183). In short, the work of the *ratio* insists on doing justice not only to the one other but to every other at the same time: “necessity of sharing, a sharing precisely justified” (EFP 97/51). The original asymmetry must be justice—whereby justice is no longer understood in the broad sense as doing justice to the other as other, but in the strict sense of the word as a way to treat all proportionally and fairly (AE

24/19). Comparing and compromise are necessary—in short, a distributive justice that grants to each their due: ‘*unicuique suum*’ (AE 191/150). In that way, the original ‘wildness’ of goodness is curbed. In that way, Levinas also proves his fundamental thesis, namely that the humane society consists not so much in the restriction of people’s common animalism but in the restriction of the infinitude of the responsibility of the one for the other. However ‘sublime’ and ‘holy’ and ‘full of grace’ this excessive responsibility may be, it must be rid of its extravagance precisely by means of creating reciprocity and equity (AE 116/193, EN 216/168, 261/200).

But... again this necessary justice displays its shadow-side. In its attempt at conquering the ‘forgetfulness’ of the original face-to-face towards the excluded, yet also unique others, and thus to move from exclusivity to inclusivity, it ends up in a new form of violence. Levinas himself comes up with the statement: ‘justice as first violence’ (EFP 103/56), that is how shocked he is by the evil that clings on to the attempt to humanise the inspiring responsibility of the one-for-the-other. We cannot avoid that justice as the humanising correction of the initial face-to-face, with all the delightful gratuitousness and unconditional grace of its extravagance and disproportion (EN 259/198), again brings forth its own opposite. After all, the insertion of unique people under a collective genre controverts the uniqueness of every-one (EFP 97/66). A paradoxical form of violence that flows forth from the humanisation of the shortcomings

of sublime goodness! Stronger still, justice as correction of the inability of the face-to-face risks ending up in the forgetfulness of its own ethical inspiration. One can thus be so swayed by the importance and urgency of the objectifying calculus and mutual comparison of people, in order not to treat anyone unfairly, that one loses sight of or even suppresses that which in the end counts, namely the responsibility of people for each other: "In this forgetting, consciousness is born as a pure possession of self by self, yet this egoism, or egotism, is neither primordial nor ultimate. A memory lies at the bottom of this forgetting" (DMT 211/183). But this 'deep' remembrance can be pushed away easily: a forgotten remembrance, or better a remembrance that one tries to forget through superficiality and negligence, hidden behind the façade of the almost obsessive plan for justice and fairness as 'methods'... without the remembering itself disappearing entirely. It can at any time be awakened out of its slumber, concretely speaking by certain 'unbearable' facts of injustice and evil, of which we shall say more later. It is in any case clear that the 'equalisation' of people in one or the other form of 'fairness calculus' should never get the final word.

2.2. Ethical requirement of a just socio-political order

But before we enter into that transcendence, we still must reflect on the further development of justice itself, for not everything has yet been said about it. However necessary justice in the strict sense may be, as a 'judgement' that

strives for the ‘fair treatment’ of everyone as equal-to-the-other it still does not suffice. More is needed. And that more has all to do with an essential dimension of the fact of the ‘many,’ namely that the ‘most’ of that many are absent, both in space as well as in time. Levinas calls this the crucial fact of ‘the third party’ (*le tiers*) that qualifies humanity as plurality (AE 64/190, 200-206/157-162). It is impossible to enter into a relationship of face-to-face with all those others. And if I were to try and go to those third-parties ‘far away’ in order to enter into a direct relationship of responsibility with them, then those who are actually near become far. Levinas finds this impossibility of simultaneous presence to all others, in particular the third-party, in the cry of the prophet Isaiah: “Peace, peace to the neighbour and the one far-off (Isaiah 57:19)” (AE 200/157). Substantiating both at the same time seems an impossible task, unless love becomes wise, meaning to say that it starts making use of the Greek ‘love of wisdom’ that searches for ‘wise ways’ (modalities) of reaching the absent third-party.

Inspired by Hegel, Levinas states that in order to substantiate the responsibility for those near *and* far, mediations (*Vermittlungen*) are needed. In order to be ethical, our responsibility of the one for the other should not be limited to those near and present, for then our responsibility would relapse into preference and exclusion. A humane responsibility can only be authentically humane when it is universal, meaning to say it extends to everyone, not only those who are near but also far, not only those who are

present but also absent. That is why justice, that intends to do justice to everyone, is faced with the challenge and the necessity to reach the third-party via all sorts of objective shapes and forms, without likewise having to enter into a *face-à-face* with them.

This is only possible when we organise justice by making use, among others, of the goods and services that are ‘marketed.’ Again, here the idea of ‘work’ (*oeuvre*) appears, now no longer as an incarnation of the responsibility of the one for the other but as an objective social form that can be separated from the maker so that it can reach others by becoming ‘giveable,’ ‘exchangeable’ and ‘tradeable’ (TI 113-114/140). Justice, in other words, must become an economic structure whereby money as ‘mediator’ *par excellence* also plays an important role (SA 80/117; TI 136/162; EN 50-52/31-33).¹³ By means of money, goods and services indeed become available to everyone.

Moreover, thanks to provisions, institutions and structures, namely all sorts of social, juridical and legal systems, we can concretise further our responsibility for the third-party. And that is no non-committal option but a hell of an ethical duty! With this, we arrive at the necessity and

¹³ It does not come as a surprise then that Levinas criticizes Heidegger’s view on ‘authentic life’ as too spiritual, precisely because he says nothing about money: “[In Heidegger] there is no philosophy of commercial exchange, in which money (which would be simple *Zuhandenheit* [*readiness-to-hand*]) is a means of measurement making equality, peace, and a ‘fair price’ possible in this confrontation, despite and before its *Verfallen* [fall] into an enslaving capitalism and Mammon” (EN 256/195).

the positive ethical meaning of the ‘state’ or of ‘the political’ (*le politique*), just as Levinas also calls it after Aristotle’s concept of the ‘polis’ (EFP 117/67)—to be distinguished from ‘politics’ as the method and technique of elections, representations, mandates... (*la politique politicienne*) (TI 276/300). So that social justice on the structural level would be no illusion, a ‘socio-political order’ is necessary (AE 205/161), now no longer based on ‘mutual self-interest’ (Hobbes) but on the responsibility-by-and-for-the-other (SA 85/123). Here, Levinas goes against Buber who through his ‘I-Thou’-interpretation of the community or of the ‘we’ as the social design of the ‘I-Thou,’ did not pay sufficient attention to the factual and especially the ethical necessity of structures, institutions, systems and legal regulations of the state, including international and global organisations and designs (NP 47-48/32-33). Without the extension of a just socio-political order, we commit treason against our responsibility for the many others, stronger still for all others, who are of no less unconditional concern to us because we neither see them nor know them or are able to imagine them, precisely because they are not present (HS 185/123).

2.3. The bad conscience of political justice

Notwithstanding this primary positive ethical meaning of economic, social and political structures Levinas is no less blind to the ambiguity, or stronger still the dark side of

the socio-political justice. Again, the idea of the reverse-side of the good appears here. Moreover, this is not coincidental but unavoidable since this shortcoming flows forth from the nature of the socio-political itself. Levinas makes this ambiguity of the socio-political clear by again examining the objectification that is coupled with its realisation, in the awareness that in the analysis at first sight one has lost sight of something.

Upon closer inspection, the objectivity of the socio-political order displays an inescapable obstinacy: “the limitations and rigors of the *dura lex*” (EN 260/199). After all, it cannot but rid the face of every other of its face, i.e. of its vulnerable (naked) and at the same time inviolable (transcendent) alterity: ‘dé-visager’ [‘de-face’) as Levinas literally calls it (EFP 94/48-49). Capturing the others under one common denominator means having to look over their uniqueness. People are approached insofar as they can be ‘merged’ and ‘reduced’ to others, via shared features. In a politically organised society, the unique other becomes citizen, worker, tax payer, businessman, teacher—in any case, a part of a category, or rather a part of multiple categories. Precisely this ‘insertion into systems and laws’ allows for the reality that organised justice can never do full justice to the uniqueness of the other. That is precisely the objective hardness of the law, a hardness that does not ensue from bad will but from good intentions. Through this, the classic saying ‘the way to hell is paved with good intentions’ acquires a surprising meaning. The noble choice

for organized, social, economic and political responsibility, inspired by the face-to-face, comes to contradict itself. When the ‘chosen ones’ are united under the umbrella of the ‘common,’ then the ‘hour of the law’ resounds, and that is no ‘happy hour’ since the law applies—and must apply—without regard for persons, i.e. without taking into account the uniqueness of the one other (EN 259/198). We can call it also the necessary neutrality and indifference of laws and structures, therefore unavoidably becoming inattentive and rude. Levinas literally interprets the severity of the political that is observed in and through small and large institutionalizations as follows: “Hence the recourse of justice to the strategies and clever dealings of politics: the rational order being attained at the price of necessities peculiar to the state. Necessities constituting a determinism as rigorous as that of nature indifferent to man, even though justice may have, at the start, served as an end or pretext for the political necessities. An end soon unrecognized in the deviation imposed by the particularities of the social, economic, legal and political system” (HS 184/123).

This means that a just political system like every just social organisation always falls short with regard to its source and intention, namely the face-to-face and the responsibility of everyone for everyone. For this reason, Levinas explicitly puts forward the ethical necessity of an always better justice (*une justice toujours meilleure*) (AS 61), “a justice which is more just” (*une justice plus juste*) (EFP 97/51) or “a justice behind justice” (*une justice derrière la justice*) (EPA

47). Evaluation, correction and revolution are needed, and this not once but time and again, however annoying one may find such permanent evaluation: “The rigours (of structural justice) have always to be mitigated. Justice always to be made more aware—more remembering—of the original ‘one-for-the-other.’ (...) A justice always to be perfected against its own harshness, through a ceaseless deep remorse of justice: legislation open to the better. It attests to an ethical excellence and its origin in for-the-other from which, however, it is distanced—always a little bit perhaps—by the necessary calculations imposed by a multiple sociality, calculations constantly starting over again. (...) A bad conscience of justice” (EN 260/199).

And last but not least, this ‘better justice,’ this revisionist, infinitising justice, evokes for Levinas ‘the idea of the Infinite as the Good beyond being.’ This means that the Infinite—as the Good—not only arises in the *face-à-face* and the appeal to responsibility, but also in the organised, economic, social, political responsibility precisely when it collides at its boundaries and thus feels impelled to rise above itself, not once but time and again: bad conscience as the emergency of the Infinite, or rather as its infinitising: “Infinity as an infinition of the Infinite, as glory” (AE 119/93).

3. Totalitarian perversion of the collective good

Still, not everything has been said about the dark reverse-side of the political. The objective side of the political order

has the tendency indeed to absolutize itself. “A justice that has no patience to strive only for a better justice but raises itself above time into an absolute and immutable regime leads us to a totalitarian politics, and—starting from the highest responsibility of the one for the other—to Stalinism” (AS 62). Or put differently: “When organized justice ‘forgets’ its bad conscience, it risks sinking into a totalitarian and Stalinist regime, and losing, in ideological deductions, the gift of inventing new forms of human coexistence” (EN 260/199).

3.1. The Stalinist perversion of the good (Grossman)

It is precisely here where the later Levinas, namely from 1985 up to 1990 (when interviews, speeches and publications came to an end due to his worsening health conditions), refers to the novel of the Russian assimilated Jew Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*. This book recalls among others his experiences as a war correspondent for the Russian army newspaper ‘The Red Star.’ In its often concise, realistic and distant style, the work can be seen as a report on the terrors of the Second World War, the battle—the siege, defence and reconquest—of Stalingrad,¹⁴ the fall of Berlin and the consequences of the Holocaust

¹⁴ Since its foundation in 1598, the city was called Tzaritsyn until it became Stalingrad in 1925 and later in 1961, as a result of de-Stalinisation, was called Volgograd.

(HN 101-102/88-89). Initially, and for quite some time, Grossman saw in the communist regime the arrival of the Messianic times: “The Soviet writer certainly believed, in October of 1917, that he had entered into the times of eschatological events, so to speak. His work prior to *Life and Fate* expressed that hope and that faith with talent and sincerity. In his book, which is about the defence and victory of Stalingrad, he expressed ample *hommage* to the glory of the Red Army and the Russian people, and recognized the truth of that glory in its abnegation and sacrifice” (HN 101/88). As a progressive intellectual, he saw communism and its ideal state or ‘*utopia*’ as the only alternative for the derailment of the bourgeois-capitalism of the Czars (and of Western Europe). As a chemist, Grossman saw in the connection between science and communism the perspective of a ‘new human’ and a ‘just future in a new land’ where all citizens would have equal rights. He gave shape to this dream in one of the main characters in *Life and Fate*, his alter ego and hero: the nuclear physicist Professor Strum. With Grossman, however, this was accompanied by the necessary hesitations and doubts (although it was easier if you—living in the system—did not doubt, or rather, if you could convince yourself that you did not doubt...). These hesitations can only be understood against the background of fear, that hypnotised people as such that their dignity and freedom easily disappeared into the background, whereby unintentionally

they became ‘complicit’...¹⁵ As a member of the official Writers’ guild, Grossman had to bow to the (increasing and ever oppressive) ‘demands’ of ‘Socialist realism,’ namely the optimism about the success of the ‘revolution of the proletariat,’ in art and literature. He interpreted that in his own manner, whereby he also criticized the system indirectly, divided as he was between loyalty and dissidence. He saw the achievements of the new workers-state, but also had to acknowledge and reflect its reverse-side, namely the ‘evident and necessary’ violence of the government... Hence, he did not join in the imposed optimism of ‘Socialist realism’ with its praise for the ‘heroic deeds of the Revolution,’ but—in clinical distance—he reported on how it truly came about. We can call this a form of dissidence in the imposed ‘general complicity.’

Therefore, the ‘faith’ of Grossman should not be treated scornfully. Even Levinas acknowledges that he was enthusiastic about the ‘new regime’ as the beginning of the realisation of all prophecies. When I asked him in my letter of 19 July 1975: “In 1917 at eleven years of age you went

¹⁵ One should also not forget the enormous machinery deployed by the Stalinist regime to put pressure, spread propaganda and to control whereby the regime kept its own people, and especially its scientists, intellectuals and artists in its stranglehold. In his novel *Everything Flows* on that same power under which Professor Strum (and himself) was subjected, Grossman writes: “An invisible power pressed upon him. He felt a hypnotising power that forced him to think as it pleased, to write what it dictated to him. That force was in himself, it made his heart falter, it dissolved his will... Only those who did not know that force themselves can be surprised that others have subjected themselves to it.” (Cited by M. KRIELAARS, *Op. cit.*, 269).

through the Russian Revolution. What did that mean for you,” he replied in his letter of 4 August 1975: “I was indeed very young, but thought that it was the beginning of all later fulfilments.” We read in the interview with François Poirié in the same line: “I was very young in February 1917 [11 years] when the Czar abdicated. I didn’t remain indifferent to the temptations of the Leninist revolution, to the new world which was about to come. But without the engagement of a militant” (EFP 67-68/27). That fascination, however, was converted into its opposite, even with Grossman, slowly but surely and irreversibly, without however putting his own life and especially that of his loved ones into serious jeopardy... In his novel Grossman describes, says Levinas, “at once cold and inspired, the Stalinist reality, in all its horror” (HN 102/88). Without shame—and, for the Soviet regime, shockingly—Grossman situates Stalinism on the same level as the terrors of the Nazi regime (AT 116/106). In an ideological discussion between Liss, a Gestapo agent and SS *Obersturmbannführer* in a German prisoners of war camp, and the elderly Bolshevik Mostovkoi, a prisoner of war in that camp, Grossman showed clearly the resemblances between both one-party states: they both develop a gigantic police and control apparatus and they organise the elimination of all external, but especially internal, enemies. Both anchor society in an encompassing ideology and on the ‘sacralisation’ (idolatry!) of the inviolable, infallible leader. In the systematic Stalinist

collectivisation of agriculture, with its unmerciful extermination of *kulaks*, Liss discovers a form of ‘*Endlösung*,’ comparable to the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis... For Grossman, the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is comparable to the ‘dictatorship of the race.’¹⁶ Last but not least, that affinity is made apparent as well in the fact that Stalin improved his Gulag-system by learning from the systematic manner with which the Nazis organised their concentration and extermination camps. In the novel, Grossman introduces a certain Katsenelenbogen, a Moscow lecturer and former official of the security service, who suggests to Stalin to develop the camps into a rational, scientifically legitimated founded order as a model for the collective well-being outside the camps: “For all its inadequacies, the system of camps had one decisive point in its favour: only there was the principle of personal freedom subordinated, clearly and absolutely, to the higher principle of reason. This principle would raise the camp to such a degree of perfection that finally it would be able to do away with itself and merge with the life of the surrounding towns and villages” (G 829). The way in which Grossman described the ‘relatedness’ between Hitler’s Third Reich and Stalin’s Soviet Union could not otherwise than shock the Soviet authorities, with the well-known ‘censorship’ and ‘condemnation of the book’ as results.

¹⁶ M. KRIELAARS, *Op. cit.*, pp. 270-271.

In his Talmud lesson ‘Beyond memory’ (HN 89-105/76-91), Levinas links not only the Nazi but likewise the Stalinist terrors with the Biblical metaphor of the “total war” (HN 102/83). There he refers to Ezekiel 38, wherein the ‘final war’ against Israel “in the latter days” (v. 16b) is announced, a war that is waged by ‘Gog and Magog’ and their innumerable allies “all of them clothed in full armour” (v. 4b), “all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army” (v. 15c). “Like a storm” (v. 9a) they spread out, “like a cloud” (v. 16a) they cover the whole land of Israel, that has been restored gradually from war, was again gathered together coming from many nations in the diaspora and was finally living undisturbed and in peace (v. 8b), “living without walls, and having no bars or gates” (v. 11c). As a total war that ‘enthusiastically but inexorably’ directed at complete destruction and extermination, it is also a war of the ‘end-times’ (v. 16b). Levinas understands this as the result of a process of remembrance and presentation, which indeed is ‘narration’ (HN 91/77). In Israel, this process is especially nurtured by the remembrance of the slavery in Egypt of which the Israelites then thought that the subjugation by the Pharaoh was *the* horrible ‘persecution’ against them. They thought they could present the future persecution on the basis of this remembrance. But with every new form of ‘evil,’ the “subservience to the empires” (HN 96/83) was more serious than what people had put up with in the past. After every persecution, one thinks: ‘It

cannot be worse than this now,’ but that turns out to be wrong... (HN 97/84). Even though one has experienced a great evil that alienates and causes heavy suffering, the future evil still is much worse than what one could imagine. Hence, the idea of the ‘final and total war’ arises, namely the ‘superlative war’ after the new ‘wildness’ to an absolute degree over and over again (HN 97/84). That is precisely the image of the war of Gog and Magog, whereby one at the same time realises immediately that one imagines something that actually cannot be imagined: “War of Gog and Magog too strong to memories, pictures, texts. Is the reality not there, unimaginable, preceding all prophecy, emerging from no story? Grossman does not quote any Hebrew verses. Do they still exist somewhere?” (HN 102/89). The presentation of the war of Gog and Magog, as it turns out in Ezekiel 38, hides the unimaginable, that which in the anticipative presentation indeed remains ungraspable and inaccessible and thus apocalyptic: ‘words and images fall short....’

Inspired by Grossman’s novel, and his origins from Lithuania’s Czarist domination and the rise of the Soviet regime in his youth under the impulse of Lenin (1878-1924) and Stalin (1878-1953) with their temptations and abominations ‘preparing’ him, Levinas discovers total war and ‘total violence’ not only in the Nazi regime, with its pursuit of an ‘*Endlösung*’ of the ‘Jewish problem,’ but likewise in Stalinism with its unimaginable horrors, namely in the way in which Grossman reports them ‘coldly and boldly’ in

Life and Fate (HN 103/89). For him, both ‘incarnate’ not so much a ‘form of war,’ but rather ‘the’ war, namely total war the reality of which defies all imagination (HN 96/83). Levinas, however, does not remain with this affirmation of Stalinism as a historical form of the ‘war of God and Magog.’ As an experienced phenomenologist—inspired by his teacher from Freiburg, Edmund Husserl¹⁷—he searches for the ‘*eidōs*,’ namely the actual, often hidden or even suppressed ‘being’ of things. Upon closer inspection, the horror of Stalinism lays not only in its massive use of violence, namely in the persecution of its own opponents (cf. *supra* on the Lubyanka prison), but also and especially in the way in which this violence is legitimised by means of the idea of ‘collective well-being.’ And for Levinas that had to do with the way in which Stalinism has given shape to its Marxist inspiration. That is the true “Stalinist perversion and its aftermath” (AV 23/28), which is not only exposed and unmasked by Grossman but also acknowledged and affirmed by Levinas.

Levinas discovers—not without shudder—in Marxism, to which Stalinism appeals for its historical form, a certain affinity with his own thought on the priority of the other and our radical responsibility for the other: “In Marxism, there is not just conquest: there is recognition of the other. True enough, it consists in saying: We can save the other if

¹⁷ E. LEVINAS, ‘Freiburg, Husserl et la phénoménologie,’ in *Revue d’Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande*, 5 (1931) 43, May 15, 402-414.

he himself demands his due. Marxism invites humanity to demand what it is my duty to give it. That is a bit different from my radical distinction between me and others, but Marxism cannot be condemned for that. Not because it succeeded so well, but because it took the other seriously” (EN 138/103). But for that reason, it is even more terrible that Marxism has turned into its own contrary,¹⁸ precisely thanks to Stalinism: “Marxism presented a generosity, whatever the way in which one understands the materialist doctrine which is its basis. (...) Its noble hope consists in healing everything, in installing, beyond the chance of individual charity, a regime without evil. And the regime of charity becomes Stalinism... That is what Grossman shows, who was there, who participated in the enthusiasm of the beginnings” (EFP 134/81). This change from the inside-out of Marxism into Stalinism is an unacceptable scandal: “The circumstances of Marxism’s having turned into Stalinism is the greatest offence of the human, because Marxism bore the hopes of humanity” (AT 116/107). This anti-humanism is, certainly in Levinas’ eyes, a greater and even more radical crisis of humanism than the later so-called postmodern, structural anti-humanism “which denies the primacy that the

¹⁸ This idea of the perversion of the idea of the good that is converted into its opposite can also be found in the work of Tzvetan Todorov, *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien. Enquête sur le siècle*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2000, 15-71, 101-107, 109-136. Todorov is also the one who wrote an introduction to the French compilation *Oeuvres* (1152 p.) of Grossman: Paris, Robert Laffont, Collection Bouquins, 2006.

human person, free and for itself, would have” (AE 164/127). In contrast, Stalinism has made its original prophetic generosity of ‘the one for the vulnerable and alienated other’ turn into its own opposite: “the supreme paradox of the defence of man and his rights being perverted into Stalinism” (AT 139/132), which Levinas calls “the greatest spiritual crisis in modern Europe” (EFP 134/81). Grossman is the “witness to the end of a certain Europe, the definitive end of the hope instituting charity in the guise of a regime, the end of socialist hope” (EFP 133/80-81). This crisis and despair consist in that in the name of Good the evil of a ‘final political, social, economic... system’ is organized. In this way, the great Good made absolute contradicts and destroys itself. Total war as total inhumanity (HN 96/83).

3.2. How a ‘feeble mind’ (Ikonnikov) unmasks the evil of the good

For Levinas—and for every reader—it is clear how Grossman lets one of the characters in his book and not himself perform this unmasking of “the Russian Revolution refuting itself in Stalinism” (DL 360/281), namely Ikonnikov-Morzj, or Ikonnikov for short. In Grossman’s novel, we come to know that he had studied at the Technological Institute of Saint Petersburg and at the end of his studies “he had been converted to the teachings of Tolstoy” and he gave up his studies to become a teacher in some small village (G 12). After eight years, he moved to

Odessa where he worked as a mechanic in the engine room of a cargo ship. After wandering in Japan and India, he resided for a time in Sydney, Australia. After the Bolshevik revolution, he returned back to Russia and joined a farmers' commune. "This was a long-cherished dream: he had believed that communist agricultural labour would bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth" (G 12). After some time in the commune, he began to preach the gospel. The horrors of the thirties affected him mentally, whereby he was coercively confined in the psychiatric hospital of the prison. When he was released, he went to live with his older brother in Belarus. When Belarus was occupied by the Germans during the war, he relapsed into his former hysteria especially when he witnessed the suffering of the Jews. When he tried to save Jewish children and women, he was soon denounced and locked up in a camp. There he quickly became known as "a strange man who would have been any age at all" (G 10), "this man was unhinged" (G 394). "He slept in the worst place in the whole hut: by the main door, where there was a freezing draught and where the huge latrine-pail or *parasha* had once stood. The other Russian prisoners-of-war referred to him as 'the old parachutist.' They (...) treated him with a mixture of disgust and pity. He was endowed with the extraordinary powers of endurance characteristic of madmen and simpletons. He never once caught cold, even though he would go to bed

without taking off his rain-soaked cloths” (G 10-11).¹⁹ Hence, he was also taken by his fellow-prisoners as “a holy fool” (G 10, 394), or as “that holy fool, that seeker after God” (G 304) (as the son of a pope, he lost his faith but never gave up questioning and searching for meaning) (RA 15; HN 103/90).²⁰ With Grossman, Levinas discovers in him “a feeble-minded” (G 394; HN 103/90). And he immediately adds: “A feeble-minded person can be inspired. This is the type that exists in Russia. It is *The Idiot* of Dostoevsky” (PO 34/90). Only the voice of such a ‘madman and simpleton’ can speak so clear and ringing (G 11).

¹⁹ He died because in the end he refused to work further on building a new *Vernichtungslager*. Against those who found that they could not refuse because they were ‘slaves’ and thus forced, Ikonnikov remained steadfast that – even in the greatest coercion – you retain the freedom to say ‘no’: “I don’t want to be told that it’s the people with power over us who are guilty, that we are innocent, that we’re not guilty because we’re not free. I *am* free! I’m building a *Vernichtungslager*; I have to answer to the people who’ll be gassed there. I can say ‘No.’ There’s nothing can stop me – as long as I can find the strength to face my destruction. I *will* say ‘No!’ *Je dirai non, mio padre, je dirai non!*” (G 288-289). And Ikonnikov does what he says: “The holy fool? The man you used to call the blancmange? He was executed. He refused to work on the construction of an extermination camp. Keyze was ordered to shoot him” (G 515).

²⁰ HN 103/90: “an inspired mind – one who in Russia is called *yourodiny*; *the son of a priest (pope)*, but without theologically orthodox faith. Perhaps the only character capable of expressing bold truths”. He belonged to a ‘dynasty’ of orthodox priests: “Since the days of Peter the Great, generations after generations of his ancestors had been priests. It was only the last generation that had followed a different path: at their father’s wish, Ikonnikov and his brothers had received a lay education” (G 12). Ikonnikov expresses his ‘theological’ doubts as follows: “Don’t make fun of me... I did not come to you to make jokes. Last year, on September 15, I saw twenty thousand Jews—women, children and old people—executed. On that day, I understood that God would not have allowed such a thing. It seemed obvious to me that God does not exist” (HN 104/90-91 – G 11-12).

The strength of his weakness consisted in his being able to notice what many others would look over, or rather in his not only being to see what there is to be seen but in seeing through to the meaning of things and exposing them, even though to the ordinary person on the street his exclamations were too crazy for words. “The ideas of this dirty, ragged old parachutist were a strange hotchpotch. He professed a belief in an absurd theory of morality that—in his own words—‘transcended class’” (G 13). But he saw the sufferings of the peasantry with his own eyes (G 12-13). “During the all-out collectivisation he had seen special trains packed with the families of *kulaks* [expropriated gentlemen farmers], considered as class enemies of the farm labourers and poor peasants]. He had seen exhausted men and women collapse in the snow, never to rise again. He had seen ‘closed’ villages where there wasn’t a living soul in sight and where every door and window had been boarded up. He remembered one ragged peasant woman with an emaciated neck and swarthy hands. Her guards had been staring at her in horror: mad with hunger, she had just eaten her two children” (G 12-13). What is shocking is that this general collectivisation, with the enforced regulation that they ‘demanded,’ “was carried out in the name of Good” (G 13 – HN 104/91). In his personal scribblings (G II Chapter 15), Ikonnikov, “this dirty, ragged old man” (G 13), makes explicit this acute thought, as follows: “I have seen the unshakeable strength of the idea of social good that

was born in my own country. I saw this struggle during the period of general collectivisation and again in 1937. I saw people annihilated in the name of an idea of good as fine and humane as the ideal of Christianity. I saw whole villages dying of hunger; I saw peasant children dying in the snows of Siberia; I saw trains bound for Siberia with hundreds and thousands of men and women from Moscow, Leningrad, and every city in Russia—men and women who had been declared enemies of a great and bright idea of social good. This idea was something fine and noble—yet it killed some without mercy, rippled the lives of others, and separated wives and husbands and children from fathers” (G 390-391- HN 104/91). Ikonnikov does not shy away from the comparison with other historical figures like Herod: “Not even Herod shed blood in the name of evil; he shed it for his version of the good” (HN 104/91 - G 389). Even Hitler went so far: “You ask Hitler,’ said Ikonnikov, ‘and he’ll tell you that even this camp was set up in the name of Good”” (G 13).

It is a painful insight that penetrates irreversibly into Ikonnikov, namely that evil is usually not committed as evil, but is legitimised as a form of the Good. One’s own particular good is sublimated into the universal good. And it is precisely that sublimation that brings about so much evil, quite seriously even that God can do nothing about it: “People struggling for their particular good always attempt to dress it up as a universal good. They say: my good

coincides with the universal good; my good is essential not only to me but to everyone; in achieving my good, I serve the universal good. And so, the good of a sect, class, nation or State assumes a specious universality in order to justify its struggle against an apparent evil” (G 389). According to Ikonnikov, this does not prevent that “great ideas are necessary in order to dig new channels, to remove stones, to bring down cliffs and fell forests. Dreams of universal good are necessary in order that great waters should flow in harmony...” (G 390). But history demonstrates time and again, up till today with the terror attacks in the name of God and the Good, “how much blood had been spilt in the name of a petty, doubtful good, in the name of the struggle of this petty good against what it believed to be evil. Sometimes the very concept of good became a scourge, a greater evil than evil itself. Good of this kind is mere husk from which the sacred kernel has been lost...” (G 388-389). Hence the challenging conclusion of Ikonnikov, that is likewise cited by Levinas: “I do not believe in the Good” (HN 104/91 – G 13), “this terrible Good with a capital ‘G’” (G 391 – HN 104/91).

3.3. A permanent ‘Stalinistoid’ temptation and the urgency of surpassing it

Long before Grossman-Ikonnikov, in a short article “Le surlendemain des dialectiques” (1970) [*The day after tomorrow of dialectics*], Levinas unmasked the Soviet regime as turning

the good into evil: “the very alienation of the work of de-alienation: Stalinism” (SD 40).²¹ This article presupposes how, on the basis of Marxism, Stalinism took on the revolutionary struggle against capitalist alliances, of which not only the labourers but also the farmers in Russia were victimised. And also how Stalinism ascribed to itself Messianic airs through its ‘class struggle.’ But upon closer inspection, this struggle presented, according to Levinas, an extremely painful paradox, which has everything to do with ‘dialectics’ that sees the evolution of history in oppositions (thesis and antithesis) out of which a higher synthesis emerges. One employs, says Levinas, an opposition between good and evil whereby “the good is merged into evil—the bright in the dark—so that evil becomes an even better good and the bright shines even more and bursts open” (SD 40). In such a dialectic of good and evil, in other words, one accepts a certain form of evil in order to achieve a higher goal. The Soviet regime has legitimised the camps and deportations and other ‘coercive regulations’ as ‘unavoidable violence’ because—according to the laws of historical materialism—they have been found necessary to achieve the sublime Good of a ‘humane society’ without alienation. In the name of the eschatological Good (the future), one is

²¹ When in his essay “Antihumanisme et éducation” (1973) [*Antihumanism and Education*] Levinas enumerates all sorts of forms of ‘dehumanisation’ in the 20th century, he uses the same expression to characterise the perversions and inversions of Communism, like “a socialism that gets entangled in bureaucracy”: “the very alienation of de-alienation” (DL 360/281).

allowed ‘here and now’ to murder, to persecute, to lock up without due process... Moreover, that politics was based on the presupposition that the ‘bearers’ of the regime availed of the truth of the future *and* the present.

But is the ‘tomorrow’ or ‘day after tomorrow’ after the dialectic process of the reversal of the good in evil that in its turn contains the promise of a higher, even final, good, indeed the ‘true’ path of the history for which we may hope and upon which we may count? The answer of Levinas is clear: “That is not the true way of the Messiah!” (SD 40). Do we not need another ‘tomorrow’ or ‘day after tomorrow’ that surpasses the revolutionary ideology with its anticipated Messianic intoxication of victory?

The demand for ‘another’ or ‘new’ surpassing of the dialectic, which legitimizes the reversal of the Good into its contrary as an access to the final Good, is for Levinas not so much a past historical fact that has become irrelevant for our time. It shows a permanent possibility, just as for him the insights of Grossman-Ikonnikov have an enduring relevance: “General and generous principles can be inverted in their application. Every generous thought is threatened by its Stalinism. (...) Ideology is the generosity and clarity of the principle which have not taken into account the inversion which keeps a watch on this general principle when it is applied” (AV 99/79). The perversion of the idea of the Good as a consequence of its organising adheres to every economic, social, juridical, political organisation, even when it flows forth from the best ethical

intention of responsibility for each other. A [totalitarian] ideology is the inexorability of the general principle which “runs the danger of becoming its own contrary, and forgets—or refuses—to consider the general in the light of the particular” (AV 99/79).

I will never forget in a conversation at home with Levinas in Paris, a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, how I noticed a certain ‘excitement’ in him. An excitement that had all to do with the fall of the Wall as a symbol of the fall of the Soviet regime—at last! He said something at the time that shocked me. It was a statement that he made with a certain fierceness, although it was anything but a sentimental exclamation but, on the contrary, something that came ‘*de profundis*,’ a true ‘*éclat de son âme*’—an outburst from his soul. With emphasis, and repeating himself—as he often did in conversations and interviews—he stated that Stalinism was in a certain sense worse than Hitlerism. When he noticed my consternation, he immediately added that minimalizing or doing away with the unique character of the diabolical evil of the Holocaust was absolutely out of the question. At the same time, he declared how Stalinism formidably aroused his abhorrence precisely because as a totalitarian, i.e. final, regime, it poisoned its own ethical inspiration and contradicted and destroyed itself in and through its own horrible misdeeds. Its

messianic pretence meant the death of the Messiah!²² And he added surprisingly and cryptically: “And now [after the fall of the Wall] Stalinism becomes our problem!” Indeed, he explained, he was not claiming that in Western Europe Stalinism as such would re-emerge. He meant that in our democratic societies we can still be faced with ‘Stalinistoid’ mechanisms and systems.

However indispensable they may be for the realisation of the humane to give shape to the responsibility of all for all, every socio-political order has the possible controllable inclination to sacralise itself, which in the Bible is called the temptation of idolatry. In this regard, Levinas refers to ‘the state of Caesar’ (in contrast to ‘the state of David’): “the State of Caesar, despite its participation in the pure essence of the State, is also the place of corruption *par excellence* and, perhaps, the ultimate refuge of idolatry. Incapable of being without self-adoration, it is idolatry itself” (AV 216/184). Every political power wants to make itself permanent and ‘install’ itself—‘enwrap’ itself—in its power, making use of all available means: direct (tyrannical) and indirect (subtle), for instance all sorts of ‘bread and games,’ financial or other concessions...: “The State of Caesar, the pagan State, is jealous of its sovereignty, the State in search of hegemony, the conquering, imperialist, totalitarian, oppressive State,

²² R. BURGGRAEVE, ‘Une générosité qui donne à penser. Mes rencontres avec Emmanuel Levinas,’ in *Cahiers d’Études Lévinassiennes*, Arceuil, 2008, n° 7 (‘Le mal’), 193-224, in particular 221-223.

attached to realist egoism” (AV 216/184). The strongest means to this consolidation of power remains sacralisation, whereby power and the system itself become unassailable. To put it in religious terms: such a sacralisation elevates something that is in no way whatsoever divine, thus something that is only created and finite, to the level of divine transcendence—whereas only the One—God himself, the Invisible One—is transcendent. Every political order comes to stand under the pressure of this ‘imperial’ temptation: “The conquering march is probably in the invincible logic of political power, whatever be the limits of that power. Political power wants to expand, it wants to be an empire” (NLT 71/102). And precisely for that reason it threatens to become a beast, stronger still ‘The Beast’ of the Apocalypse: “the scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns” (Rev 17:3b). In that manner, it is elevated factually and historically to a holy, metaphysical height. In the case a ‘secular sacralisation’ is at hand, and thus not a theocracy as was the case, among others, of Stalinism, a remarkable paradox takes place in the sense that it then is about a ‘divinisation without God’ that at the same time implies a replacing of God: “enlightened tyranny” (NLT 70/101) and “the diabolical tricks by which the civilizations which rest on truths that rush forward, do not keep their own promises” (NLT 69/100).

Not only a political system but also every social system—for instance in somatic and psychological health care, in the environmental sector, in education, in development

cooperation (with its non-governmental organisations)—is by nature conservative, in the sense that it can turn into its own contrary by raising itself up as a definitive regime, a messianic “system of salvation” (EFP 135/81), that gives a final answer to the needs of its ‘subjects’ or ‘clients.’ Levinas pointed out how not only Stalinist politics suffocated itself in all sorts of centralist administration and bureaucracy, but how this fate threatens just as much our so-called democratically designed and controlled forms of politics, a paradoxical form of violence, namely a form of ‘non-violent violence.’ “The history of modern Europe is the permanent temptation of an ideological rationalism, and of experiments carried out through the rigor of deduction, administration and violence” (HN 157/135): administration, with its ‘gluttony for dossiers,’ as a self-multiplying system whereby the state consolidates and develops its power, at the cost of the unique ‘I’ that often no longer recognises its own will in the inferences that are drawn politically from its vote (TH 62/15-16). It is therefore not surprising that Levinas, in his attention for the social-ethical significance of money, is at the same time alert to the perversion of money as a ‘system of mediation’ into a monetary ‘institutionalism’ and even totalitarian regime: “the multiple conjunctures of the economic order—which sells so well on television—accumulations in power—or in ‘omnipotence’—at the cost of human beings” (SA 79-80). Financial, economic, social regulatory systems exist that not only become more and more complex but like octopuses grasp even farther than

themselves with their tentacles. And it is not because these systems arise out of an ethical responsibility that they are ensured against the ‘systemic aberration’ and ‘perversion from the inside-out’ into institutionalism. Notwithstanding their original goodwill, they can be developed in such a manner that they undermine their noble goals and thus bring about evil as the reverse-side of the good.

4. Beyond the socio-political order

Hence according to Levinas, the political order, with all its social and economic levels and all its juridical and institutional forms, should never get the final word about the realisation of justice and a humane society. Ethically speaking, there is a need for a transcendence of the political. At the formulation of our starting question, namely whether society refers back to the delimitation of our bestiality or of our responsibility for each other, Levinas likewise asks himself what difference exists between the institutions—the political—that arise from both. His answer is as follows: “There is, at least, this one: in the second case, one can revolt against institutions in the very name of that which gave birth to them” (DMT 212/183). This protest, as a refusal of resignation, is essential!

4.1. Refusing resignation

A direct, clearly visible form of refusal of resignation is to be found in a remarkable passage of Grossman’s book, which has not been noticed or cited by Levinas. Ikonnikov

refers, in his scribblings, to a Biblical text, namely Jeremiah 31:15: “In Rama a voice was heard, lamentation, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.” A woman, Rachel, who has lost her children doesn’t want to be consoled... Nothing makes it acceptable or justified. “What does a woman who has lost her children care about a philosopher’s definition of good and evil?” (G 390) We also find the same verse of Jeremiah in the gospel according to Matthew, where there is mention of the infanticide by Herod (Mt 2:16–18). This infanticide takes place in Bethlehem and its environs at the command of King Herod with the intention of eliminating “the child who has been born king of the Jews” (Mt 2:2), whose ‘rising star’ was seen in the East by the Magi—and who thus most likely formed a threat to his power (Mt 2:16–18). It is not because a crime, a murder, is placed within a larger whole—“is it not better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed?” (high priest Caiaphas) (Jn 11:50)—that it is then ‘okay and alright’ and acquires a higher meaning, and is thus justifiable. In a society, it is ethically justifiable (and necessary!) that victims of murder and terror and their relatives should not seek consolation..., so that evil is not covered up nor explained away. Otherwise, the ‘final judgment’ would be relegated to history, which at the same time would mean the end of the value and dignity of the unique other that can never be equated with history—not even with his own history (cf. *infra* as well).

A less visible and more subtle, but no less real form of refusal of resignation can be found in critically surpassing a pliant docility regarding laws and rules. In Hitlerism Levinas discovered how blind obedience totally can derail: “The exaltation of sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice, faith for the sake of faith, energy for the sake of energy, fidelity for the sake of fidelity, fervor for the heat it procures, the call to a gratuitous—that is to say, heroic—act; this is the permanent origin of Hitlerism. The romanticism of fidelity for its own sake, abnegation for its own sake, bound anyone, for any task, to these who truly did not know what one is doing, and thinking of a content” (DL 197-198/149). For the critical surpassing of blind obedience Levinas finds a clue in the Talmudic view on ‘oral law’ with its contextual particularity and casuistry. In and through its never-ending interpretations, oral law surpasses ‘written law’ and its general validity (AV 98/78). Oral law prevents that written Law becomes enclosed within itself and is perverted into a fundamentalist stagnation, detached from and raised above the history and the earth-bound anchoring of the human person. A legal formulation can easily acquire an eternal character, especially when it is seen as a ‘divine commandment’ that falls down straight from heaven (cf. the ‘divine command theory’). Thus, in contrast to that, the Talmud also acknowledges that written Law refers back to oral law, i.e. to transmission via word of mouth and thus to hermeneutics: “The Talmud is the struggle with the Angel

[of the absolute]” (AV 99/79). In contrast to the strict deductive approach that only thinks of the application of the general onto the particular, the Talmud realises that in such a mere deduction, that holds on obstinately to its validity, it runs the risk of turning into its own opposite and thus in the name of humanity installs the inhuman. Hence, Talmudic hermeneutics complements the order of the deductive application of reality with the inverse order, namely that not only the universal must guard over the particular but that the particular should guard over the general just as well. We can call this the ‘casuistic’ structure and dynamism of the Law. This ‘subversion’ of the particular in the universal protects us against totalitarian ideology (AV 10/XIII). This means that interpretation not only follows after the written Law, but also precedes it. There is no revelation without hermeneutics; stronger still: there is no revelation without an embedment in a precedent and consequent hermeneutics (AV 165-169/135-139).

This brings Levinas to plead for a *noble casuistry* (LAV 121). The positive value of casuistry consists in the way it takes constant account of the one, concrete ‘case’ before it here and now. Or better, it considers persons and situations not as particular, exemplary applications of a general principle, but in their irreducible and unrepeatable unicity. We cannot deny that casuistry has often had (and still has) a pejorative reputation, and mostly through its own fault. Some have appealed to it hypocritically, or even abused it in

order to, as it turned out, either defend themselves or pass judgement on others. Indeed, while painting a concrete situation, one can always find details to justify one's judgement ideologically, whatever that judgement might entail. Nevertheless, casuistry is a matter of great importance, for it is essentially a search for an adequate basis to render judgement, understood to remain within the limits of the relations and actions of a unique situation. It is above all an acknowledgement of the fact that a being finds itself before me that is utterly new or '*hapax*': someone who is there for that one single instance, here and now. In this regard, ethical casuistry is an eminent precautionary measure against every form of ideology and reduction, which makes of the singular case a concrete deduction of the general principle—bad casuistry (LAV 122). However necessary it may be, the generality of laws, i.e. the generality that is present under the bureaucratic point of view, falls sorely short.

4.2. Human rights install the transcendence of the political

Levinas therefore poses the question on how we can concretely see to it that no single regime can ever get the final word on justice and humanity. As an answer to this question he states that a 'state'—every socio-political order—has to be developed as a "liberal state" (EN 125/167). With this category, Levinas makes no appeal for party political 'liberalism' for his view on responsibility-by-

and-for-the-other as the foundation for society implies after all a non-inconsequential criticism on the ‘liberal I’ with its self-interest. For him it is about a ‘fundamental liberalism’ (*le foncier libéralisme*) that makes the state into an ‘open system’ that always remains temporary and for that reason is in need of constant transcendence.

The idea and the demand for a non-totalitarian state shows us an important difference between Grossman and Levinas. Confronted as Grossman and Ikonnikov were with Stalinist terror, they lose all trust in the state as an organised form of collective well-being. Even Levinas acknowledges how the book *Life and Fate* is marked by a “constant pessimism”: “The long-standing Western confidence in rational practices being generated from political and religious institutions and meant to foster man’s being a neighbour to the other—belief in the human institutions through which the good would succeed in being—is shaken [in Stalinism]” (HN 103/89). Levinas shared wholeheartedly the distrust towards totalitarian states and regimes. But with him this does not imply that he loses sight of the importance of the ‘polis’ or the political, as was already made clear above. Time and again, he keeps on emphasizing the ethical necessity of society and politics, which for him moreover also implies that he deems as possible that which is an ethical must. The possibility and reality of the political order is indeed linked to the condition of the ‘liberal’ principle, namely that a considerable and constant vigilance is needed

to prevent the structural, institutional and legal forms from deteriorating into (brutal or subtle) forms of autocracy and institutionalism, police state and totalitarianism. Precisely because Levinas remains believing in the possibility and the task of the political order—in contrast to Ikonnikov-Grossman who have lost their trust in the Soviet state entirely—he also keeps on hammering away time and again on the liberal state that draws its liberal character from the space that it creates for criticism on the justice achieved and thus for an always better justice (cf. also *supra*).

In order to install this liberal, non-totalitarian political order effectively, Levinas ascribes a central role to human rights, to be understood as the rights of the vulnerable other. It is indeed characteristic how “in a totalitarian state, a mockery is made of the rights of man, and the promise of an ultimate return to the rights of man is postponed indefinitely” (HS 184/123). For that reason, it is important to affirm the prophetic extra-territoriality of human rights: “The concern of the rights of man is not a function of the state, it is an institution in the state which is not of the state” (EFP 119/68). Human rights surpass all political power and all reason of state, and they can be invoked by every human person as person—and thus not only by every legally recognized citizen of a state. “This also means (and it is important that this be emphasized) that the defence of the rights of man corresponds to a vocation *outside* the state, disposing, in a political society, of a kind of extra-

territoriality, like that of prophecy in the face of the political powers of the Old Testament, a vigilance totally different from political intelligence, a lucidity not limited to yielding before the formalism of universality, but upholding justice itself in its limitations. The capacity to guarantee that extra-territoriality and that independence defines the liberal state and describes the modality according to which the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible” (HS 185/123).

4.3. Small goodness as the ultimate political transcendence and social leverage

The final word ‘beyond the political,’ according to Levinas, is given to the ‘small goodness’ of which he finds direct inspiration in Grossman’s novel. In his scribblings, the ‘feeble minded’ Ikonnikov defends that “good is not found neither in the sermons of religious teachers and prophets, nor in the teachings of sociologists and popular leaders, nor in the ethical systems of philosophers...,” but in the love and pity that ordinary people bear in their hearts for all life (G 391). These ordinary people, who are considered by the ‘powers that be’ as ‘simpletons’ or ‘feeble minds,’ bring back amongst the people *and* in the systems the “lost kernel” (G 389)—the “sacred kernel”—that has fallen away from the hypocritical, literally sanctimonious, husks of the final and violently organised good (cf. *supra*). We read literally the following from Ikonnikov, which has also been

cited by Levinas: “There exists, side by side with this so terrible greater good, human kindness in everyday life. It is the goodness of an old woman carrying a piece of bread to a prisoner, the goodness of a soldier allowing a wounded enemy to drink from his water-flask, the kindness of youth towards age, the goodness of a peasant hiding an old Jew in his loft. It is the goodness of those prison guards who risk their own freedom, smuggle the letters of prisoners out to wives and mothers” (HN 104-105/91 – G 391-392). Levinas draws still another example from the book on small goodness: “The woman who leaves her husband because she loves another, but who comes back when he is persecuted by the Special Section of the Soviet Front Headquarters” (PO 33/89). Towards the end of Grossman’s book, Levinas still finds another story of an almost absurd small goodness. When Stalingrad is liberated and the Germans defeated and crushed (G 849), the German prisoners—amongst whom an officer—were forced by the Soviet soldiers to bring up the corpses of fallen Russians, whom the Germans dumped in the basements of the Gestapo, in order to identify and then bury them. They thus had to carry the corpses of those whom they themselves first tortured and killed. Numerous residents of Stalingrad stood watching, grimacing behind handkerchiefs before their faces because of the horrible stench that ensued from the half-decomposing corpses that were brought up. They all jeered and cursed the German soldiers with sheer

enthusiasm (!), but of course from a safe distance. It was not a sight to behold, and yet they kept on looking—a remarkable from of ‘repulsive’ voyeurism: what you get to see is utterly abominable and yet you do not turn away. Amongst the onlookers was an old woman who could not escape attention because she was worse and more vicious than the others: she cursed and screamed and kicked incessantly at the shabby German soldiers. That naïve refrain about the goodness of little old people who took pity on the soldiers is certainly not applicable here. What we do see is the cruel little old woman who does not relent in her rage: her entire soul filled with furious hatred was exploding, she just kept going on... But all of a sudden, she fell silent. She ran to a German soldier at the other side of the street, still quite young, surely not yet eighteen, who succumbed under the weight of the corpses he was forced to carry. The old woman was the most vicious, but also the most unfortunate: utterly dramatic! She took a piece of bread from her pouch and gave it to the young soldier. And she returned to the other side of the street. She screamed no more, what resounded was silence... (SA 47; EFP 134/81).

Here is still another example, as was told by Ikonnikov in his scribblings:

“Some Germans arrived in a village to exact vengeance for the murder of two soldiers. The women were ordered out of their huts in the evening and set to dig a pit on the edge of the

forest. There was one middle-aged woman who had several soldiers quartered in her hut. Her husband had been taken to the police station together with twenty other peasants. She didn't get to sleep until morning: the Germans found a basket of onions and a jar of honey in the cellar; they lit the stove, made themselves omelettes and drank vodka. The eldest then played the harmonica while the rest of them sang and beat time with their feet. They didn't even look at their landlady—she might just as well have been a cat. When it grew light, they began checking their machine-guns; the eldest of them jerked the trigger by mistake and shot himself in the stomach. Everyone began shouting and running about. Somehow the Germans managed to bandage the wounded man and lay him down on a bed. Then they were called outside. They signed to the woman to look after the wounded man. The woman thought to herself how simple it would be to strangle him. There he was, muttering away, his eyes closed, weeping, sucking his lips... Suddenly he opened his eyes and said in very clear Russian: 'Water, Mother.' 'Damn you,' said the woman. 'What I should do is strangle you.' Instead she gave him some water. He grabbed her by the hand and signed

to her to help him sit up: he couldn't breathe because of the bleeding. She pulled him up and he clasped his arms round her neck. Suddenly there was a volley of shots outside and the woman began to tremble. Afterwards she told people what she had done. No one could understand; nor could she explain it herself' (G 392-393).

She was condemned by the others as stupid and... as a collaborator. And thus is her small goodness less naïve, on the contrary it is more dangerous than it seems at first sight (cf. also *infra*).

It is clear that we can only understand small goodness correctly if we have an eye for the contrast or the contradiction in which it arises. It is no sentimental outburst in a context of satisfaction and a care-free society. It shows its meaning and strength in a context of threat, violence and terror, as the examples above evoke. But with this contrast, not everything has already been said about its true nature. This requires a reflection on the two aspects that are invoked by the category 'small goodness,' namely 'smallness' and 'goodness.'

First and foremost, it is goodness. And that is an idea that has been present since the beginning of Levinas' work and that even receives a prominent place in his thought from the beginning: "You find elsewhere this word goodness in my work, in *Totality and Infinity*, which preceded significantly my reading of Grossman" (EFP 135/81). In the first part of this

article, goodness was mentioned especially through its ‘effective’ incarnation, going beyond every kind of ‘affective’ emotionality. Now, we would like to interpret briefly the internal quality of goodness as Levinas understands it. It has both an asymmetrical as well as an exuberant dynamism, insofar as it is rooted in desire—which is distinguished from need. What immediately stands out, even in the spontaneous understanding of goodness, is that it intends to surpass every form of reciprocity—‘*do ut des.*’ It is not connected to the condition of reciprocity and of utility. It does not calculate and goes beyond all self-interest. It happens for the sake of the other, without the one exercising it having to ‘contribute’ something. And hence, according to Levinas, it is an expression of desire (*désir*) and not of need (*besoin*). Need after all starts with my hunger, my necessity, and the satisfying answer that the sought-after object can give me. Desire does not start from an emptiness but from a fullness that wants to ‘pour out’ itself (HAH 45/29). Desire does not lock itself up within itself but moves outwards, not because it needs something else, but in order to give itself to the other. Hence, Levinas characterises desire as “insatiable desire—not because it corresponds to an infinite hunger, but because it is not an appeal to food. This desire is insatiable, but not because of our finitude” (TI 34/63). Precisely because desire does not ensue from need, it does not approach the other functionally (‘for me’—‘for my sake’) but for the sake of the other: “A desire

without satisfaction hence takes cognizance of the alterity of the other” (LPI 175/56). In other words, desire is an expression of our infinity, a fullness that is awakened and struck within us by the other and simmers up in us into an ‘abundant profusion,’ an infinity that ‘infinitis’ itself and thus never ceases. What is out of the question here is a ‘commandment’ or a ‘law,’ and thus of a must, unless we understand desire’s internal impetus towards self-surpassing as an ‘internal must’—which is precisely the very essence of desire. “Desire is revealed to be goodness” (*Le désir se révèle bonté*) (HAH 46/30).

But despite its exuberance and infinity, Levinas takes over Ikonnikov-Grossman’s characterisation of it as ‘small.’ This is based on the fact that it is an “ethics without ethical system” (EFP 135/81), meaning to say that it rises above or beyond whatever system of norms and rules. Stronger still, its vocation is to surpass in particular the political as a system, with its alienations, including its totalitarian aberrations. That is why it neither can nor may be of the same calibre as the social, economic, juridical and political regime. Hence, Ikonnikov-Grossman and Levinas call it ‘small,’ or ‘unsightly,’ weak and powerless, fragmentary and partial, unostentatious and casual. It is anything but lofty and awesome, like the idea of the collective Good announcing itself as something ‘great and threatening.’ It is so commonplace that it usually happens unnoticed. It takes place without much reflection—‘thoughtlessly,’ as Ikonnikov calls

it. It happens unplanned and coincidentally. It is so meagre that you barely hear any testimonials about it. It usually remains invisible, certainly to the 'media' that makes things public. It is like tiny particles spread here and there through life, so that we also easily overlook them. "One might just as well be afraid of a freshwater fish carried out by chance into the salty ocean," says Ikonnikov ironically (G 393). Its powerlessness is so huge that we also begin to doubt it easily. In its smallness it is also foolish, silly, even insane and to a certain extent meaningless, says Ikonnikov. But it is and remains "as simple as life itself" (G 393). In its weakness, it possesses a hidden force, a mild force that does not impose anything or impose itself on anyone, for it never enforces itself.

Hence, it can never be raised into an 'ideology,' 'theory,' or thought construct (RA 15). And it should never be the object of preaching or edifying and persuading discourse (EN 116/85), or worse still of dogmatic argumentation or propaganda that in a sly manner presents or imposes it as the 'truth' (EN 139/103). Actually, it must remain under the radar of every argumentation... whatever the philosophical discourse may be that tries to make it seem suspicious. In spite of the awareness that it cannot be hushed up, the uneasy awareness must remain that this speech can degrade into an oppressive 'persuasion speech.' It is only thanks to this 'self-restraint' that the modest and at the same time 'effective' force of the small goodness can remain intact.

Levinas thus attempts to summarise what Ikonnikov has scribbled on the gentle, hidden force of small goodness: “In the decay of human relations, in that sociological misery, goodness persists. In the relation of one person to another, goodness is possible. The impossibility of goodness as a government, as a social institution. Every attempt to organize the human fails. The only thing that remains vigorous is the goodness of everyday life. Ikonnikov calls it the small goodness. It’s a goodness without witnesses. That goodness escapes all ideology: he says that ‘it could be described as goodness without thought.’ Why without thought? Because it is a goodness outside all systems, all religions, all social organisations. Gratuitous goodness! The feeble-minded are those who defend it and work at its perpetuation from one being to another. It is so fragile before the might of evil. It is a ‘mad goodness,’ the most truly human in a human being. It defines man, despite its powerlessness, and Ikonnikov has another beautiful image to qualify it: ‘It is beautiful and powerless, like the dew.’ “What freshness in this despair” (AT 117-118/107-109). However banal the small goodness may seem, “in it the human turns the inhuman of being, always preoccupied with itself, upside down” (VA 92/106). It reveals noiselessly but stubbornly the ‘otherwise than being’ of disinterestedness as a “seed of folly” (*grain de folie*) (AE 180/142).

Precisely because this small goodness is an ‘ethics without ethical system,’ it can only be authenticated by ‘individual

consciences,' which leads Levinas to the idea of slightly anarchical "ethical individualism" (TH 82/24). "There are, if you like, the tears that a civil servant [of state or socio-political order] cannot see: the tears of the [unique] other. In order for things to develop an equilibrium, it is absolutely necessary to affirm the infinite responsibility of each, for each, before each. In such a situation [of social and political systems], individual consciences are necessary, for they alone are capable of seeing the violence that proceeds from the proper functioning of Reason itself [*la raison d'état*]. To remedy a certain disorder which proceeds from the Order of universal Reason, it is necessary to defend subjectivity. As I see it, subjective protest is not received favourably on the pretext that its egoism is sacred but because I alone can perceive the 'secret tears' of the Other, which are caused by the functioning—albeit reasonable—of the hierarchy [and the administrative and legal system of the socio-political order]" (TH 81/23). Consequently, the unique, responsible subjectivity is indispensable for assuring the nonviolence that the socio-political order searches for in equal measure, but that is again brought into a tight corner by that order as system and regime. In and through the small goodness, the one and only 'I' accords acknowledgement and confirmation of the unique other. In its modest and almost casual, unnoticeable movement, it actualises a form of respect by means of making no claims on the other nor humiliating the other, but by approaching the other and assisting the other

in word and deed (EN 48-49/30). In spite of itself, the small goodness reveals that “the substance of the I is made of saintliness. It is perhaps in this sense that Montesquieu rested democracy upon virtue” (TH 81/23).

4.4. Small goodness unveils the depersonalising dynamics in the socio-political order

The question now is, in which manner does the force of the vulnerable small goodness show itself not only beyond or above but also within the system of the political? According to Levinas, it shows its ‘powerful powerlessness’ as a critical leverage that unmasks the eventual depersonalising horror of every socio-political order. Through a socio-political system’s generalising objectivity that treats all people as equal, and thus overlooks their uniqueness, such a system, however great or small, is inclined to treat people abstractly and impersonally. In that way, such an organisation bears within itself the seeds of depersonalisation, which Levinas characterises as “there is” (*il y a*) (EE 94/58),²³ “unbearable in its indifference” (EFP

²³ In Levinas, the ‘there is’ stands for the anonymous, the darkness of the night within which everything disappears, wherein there no longer is a this or that, a here or there, an above or below. The ‘there is’ is the nothing of ‘nothing-ness,’ The no one of ‘no-one-ness’: “an existing that occurs without us, without a subject, an existing without existents” (TA 25/46). It is the shoreless sea of ‘being-without-beings,’ wherein all separate beings are swallowed within the chaos before creation – the *tohubobu* (EI 46/48). We are stripped of our being-subject so that we no longer have a private existence; we become a part of the ‘*apeiron*’ (Anaximander) or the ‘indeterminate,’ without being and counting

90/45). This anonymous, or better anonymising “il y a”-tic dynamic manifests itself in an extreme manner in a political order that raises itself to a final, unchanging—divine!—regime, i.e. to the final word on the well-being of people. The paradox, however, is that such a regime overlooks the horror of this depersonalisation since in its complacency it raises itself as the good and the true. That is why the shock-experience of a radical crisis is needed in order to shake such a regime awake from its dogmatic slumber. Hence Levinas shockingly calls the *there is* “a modality of the one-for-the-other” (AE 208-209/164), of which the small goodness is an eminent expression. In a surprising, paradoxical manner, the *there is* introduces the hour of the *otherwise than being* into the *being* of every socio-political order, both the totalitarian as well as the non-totalitarian orders, namely the hour of its suspension, stronger still its questioning. Without the original ‘for the other,’ that inspires the socio-political and thus at least lies dormant within it, a regime that dons itself with ‘universal rationality’ or absolutises itself remains fixated on its ‘unassailable truth.’ It gives rise to its own drama, its self-betrayal. It needs ‘something else’ in order to arrive at an awareness of its terror. And that other is precisely the ‘for the other’ that unmasks the depersonalising character of the

for and out of oneself anymore (TA 24-30/44-51): “anonymous process of being – being that weighs...” (EFP /90-91/45-46). A feeling of horror creeps up within us in this depersonalization (EE 98/60): “In horror a subject is stripped of his subjectivity (...). Horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua *entity*, inside out” (EE 100/61).

regime. The *there is*, which in an ordered and decent socio-political system appears time and again as a crisis that unsettles this society precisely when it accords itself a final and decisive significance, acquires an essential ‘vocation,’ namely to lead the socio-political order back to its source: the liberating ethical relationship of the one-for-the-other. Thanks to “the excessive or disheartening hubbub and encumberment of the *there is*” (AE 209/164), namely the evil that lies hidden as the reverse side under the good of organised justice—hidden but for that reason no less real—the ethical subject is lifted up above the system, or rather is driven out of the system in order—without further guarantees from the system—to take seriously the being and well-being of others (NP 64/44). That is precisely what the small goodness does as the form of the ‘one-for-the-other’ (AT 118/109).

The socio-political *there is*, that summons for the ‘one-for-the-other’ (of the small goodness) beyond the state and every socio-political order, is also the ‘place’ (*le milieu divin*) where God ‘emerges’ as a crisis that installs, in the socio-political, the movement towards the ‘infinite,’ namely beyond the system, over again. It is a conscious choice that we draw attention to this. The thought of Levinas is known both as atheistic and at the same time religious. It is known as atheistic because it radically questions a number of traditional images of God, namely when these endanger human independence and dignity. As religious because it makes both the phenomenology of the face and the ethics

of responsibility that ‘arrives at’ the ‘I’ as an appeal from the face, explicit as ‘unto God’ (*à-Dieu*). Because this movement of ethics as ‘towards-God’ is widely known, we have only given it attention summarily and ‘*en passant*’ above. But because the interest amongst most readers of Levinas for his religious philosophy stops with the face and responsibility, we would like to show here how God also comes to the fore in Levinas’ thought on society and political order. To be sure, this is uncommon but at the same time it is ‘obvious’ in the sense that it is a logical extension of his thinking-onto-God from the epiphany of the face and our responsibility for the other.

Without God as ‘idea of infinity,’ we would be inclined to submit ourselves to the socio-political order as ‘final reason and universality,’ whereby a society would be surrendered to its own perversion. Is this not the true messianic meaning of the *there is* in society? In the ambiguity and ‘none-sense’ that it creates, it opens up space for the new, the other: the infinitising of the infinite (AE 208-209/164). Through the awareness of the *there is*—as modality of responsibility—God appears as the Infinite, meaning to say as the “contestation” (AE 198/156) and “subversion” (AE 206/162) of the established and congealed order, that means of every socio-political system that proclaims itself the definitive reality or ‘the’ enlightened humanity: “anarchy of the Infinite” (AE 199/156). The Infinite, precisely as ‘non-finite-in-the-finite,’ is a sign of contradiction, a thwarting,

embarrassing form of disgrace and scruple or pebble in the shoe, that does not sow certainty but scepticism, in the sense that the Infinite itself displays the character of the *there is*, that brings into discredit the tyranny that is exercised by a totalising totality. God as trauma and subversion, not as assurance (DVI 168/106). In the socio-political order the Infinite reveals itself as radical ‘dis-order,’ that displays traits of nihilism, namely the ‘none-sense’ or rather the ‘dis-like’ in the established values, structures and powers: “the monstrosity of the Infinite” (DVI 110/66). The Infinite resists the rigidity of systems and their principles, rules, forms and eschatologies. In this regard, we can say and ‘profess’: “Thanks to God” (*grâce à Dieu*), “with the help of God”—God the Infinite as the Good-beyond-being—there is an ‘above’ the system, whereby the order is lifted above itself into the ‘extra-ordinary’ of ‘for-the-other’ (AE 201-202/156, 204/160).

This surpassing of the ‘reason of state’ thus means not a denial of reason, and thus not opting for irrationality, but a crisis of socio-political reason because it is not ‘universal reason’ enough, precisely because as a system it threatens to forget or to destroy the ‘for-each-other.’ The ‘for-the-other,’ where the Infinite comes to mind within us, installs in an ethical manner universal reason namely as the responsibility of everyone for everyone. Precisely this universal responsibility surpasses every socio-political system that, as a system, is inclined to lock itself up within itself. In the words

of Levinas himself: “As opposed to the interestedness of being, to its primordial essence which is *conatus essendi*, a perseverance in the face of everything and everyone, a persistence in being-there—the human (love of the other, responsibility for one’s fellowman, an eventual dying-for-the-other, sacrifice even as far as the mad thought in which dying for the other can concern me well before, and more than, my own death)—the human signifies the beginning of a new rationality beyond being. A rationality of the Good higher than all ‘essence’ [ousia – the verbal sense of being]? An intelligibility of goodness” (EN 258/197).

That explains why Levinas makes a radical distinction between the “judgement by history” and the “judgement of history” [judging history] (TI 221-222/244). According to the Hegelian concept of the “judgement by history” history itself and especially its end or fulfilment acquires the last word on all that has taken place (“*die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*”), or as the folk proverb has it: ‘Time will tell,’ from which ‘fashionable thinking’ ensues: ‘You should go along with the times.’ But this “virile judgement by history, the virile judgement of ‘pure reason,’ is cruel” (TI 221/243), for its totalising method imposes silence on the unique and transcendent one who is responsible for the other. Precisely on account of this injustice a “judgement of [about] history” is needed. “The Invisible must manifest itself in history if history is to lose its right to the last word” (TI 221/243). Therefore, “the idea of a judgement by God represents the

limit idea of a judgement that takes into account the essential offence that results from judgement (even a judgement that is rational and inspired by universal principles)” (TI 221/244). From a point outside of history—namely from God as the Infinite, radically Transcendent One—all that has transpired in history is subjected to a critical judgement, so that no single historical truth that has rigidified into a system, not even on the basis of universal but abstract and impersonal ‘principles,’ acquire a final significance. However, it is not because this judgment by God is invisible—the judgement by the Transcendent One—and thus essentially discrete and remains without majesty (‘God sees without being seen’), that it does not raise its voice in order to judge. It is a voice that comes ‘from God knows where,’ a voice that is not unreal because it is soft and without violence. Rather it is a voice that, in spite of everything and time and again (up to infinity), makes social, economic, financial, juridical and political systems ‘feel uneasy’ and therein touches people—not only judging them but also affirming and summoning them—to an all-surpassing responsibility of the one for the other (TI 224-225/247). Upon closer inspection, Rachel and the mothers who weep because their children are no more on account of violence by the state—the infanticide by Herod—are those who in their own bodies reject “the verdicts by history” (DL 41/23), precisely because they have the courage to judge history here and now. We should not seek ‘comfort’ in the ‘reasonable thought’ that a ‘crime’ can

still acquire a positive significance out of the whole, or out of the further course or the rounding off of history (DL 110/81). Those who do not allow themselves to be ‘satisfied’ by the later global significance of the violence that is now inflicted on the innocent (children) are, in other words, those who reject the ‘judgement by history’ to the benefit of the ‘judgement about history.’ In this regard, they likewise represent the idea of God’s judgement about history, in contrast to the view that divinises history itself by giving it ‘definitive judgement’ (TI XI-XII/23).

4.5. A reversal of the view on the future

Returning back to the small goodness itself, we now can also point out how it plays a crucial role in the way in which the judgement BY history is surpassed by the judgement ABOUT history. Small goodness, after all, is not simply an idea in itself, but it introduces a reversal in the conceptualisation of history itself.

At first glance, the idea of small goodness evokes the indulgent-cynical reproach of ‘cheap and silly altruism’ or “love as amusement” (*amour rigolo, amour rigolade*) (EFP 115/65). That is also what happens when in *Life and Fate* a certain Mostovskoy has read through the scribblings of Ikonnikov. Grossman notes how he first remains seated for a few minutes with his eyes half closed and then reacts contemptuously: “Yes, the man who had written this was (...) the ruin of a feeble spirit! The preacher declares that the

heavens are empty... He sees life as a war of everything against everything [cf. Hobbes]. And then at the end he starts tinkling the same old bells, praising the goodness of old women and hoping to extinguish a world-wide conflagration with an enema springe. What trash!” (G 394). The reproach, that also ridicules small goodness, shall recur time and again and at times such a ridiculing reproach will be convincing and effective. Namely when the small goodness is reduced to an isolated burp of feelings of empathy or sympathy, without effectively doing something, whereas the small goodness precisely develops its own decisiveness in contrast with the powers of a system that threatens to flood everything over and against which one cannot put up any resistance.

Now the question is how small goodness installs a new view on history. For that purpose, we start with the last paragraph of the scribblings of Ikonnikov (G 394), to which Levinas also refers in conclusion of his Talmudic lesson ‘Beyond memory’ (HN 105/91): “My faith was *steeled*, reinforced in Hell. It has emerged from the flames of the crematoria, from the concrete of the gas chambers. I have seen that it is not human beings who are impotent in the struggle against evil, but the power of evil that is impotent in the struggle against human beings. The powerlessness of small goodness, is the secret of its immortality. It can never be conquered. Evil is impotent before it. Prophets, religious teachers, reformers, social and political leaders are impotent before it. This dumb, blind love is human’s meaning.

Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is the struggle of a great evil trying to crush the tiny seed of humanity. But if even now [by Stalinism, Hitlerism, genocides, terrorism ...] the human has not been destroyed in human beings, evil will never prevail” (G 394). This quote presupposes a classic view on history, namely that it can be read globally as a struggle between good and evil, or rather as a struggle of good against evil. Moreover, this dynamism of history is interpreted from a certain Messianic or eschatological perspective, in the sense that one ‘hopes’ and ‘believes’ that history will end well. Concretely: good shall defeat evil. There will be a new world without blood and tears, without hate and persecution and extermination... This new world, however, can only be achieved when good takes on the struggle against evil. Or, as we also find in the Bible, after the war of Gog and Magog (Ez 38) follows the struggle of the ‘*Elohe Zebaoth*’—the Lord of Hosts—against Gog and Magog and their allies, with the outcome of the final victory of good over evil, *in casu* of Israel’s liberation (Ez 39). All this thanks to the ‘raised and powerful arm’ of the Lord about which Exodus also has it in memory and interpretation of the departure out of slavery from Egypt (HN 102-103/89-90): “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God” (Num 15:41). From the experience of that liberation arises the idea of, and especially the belief in, a total liberation, a new ‘unheard of future’ that will not remain a dream but shall become a reality (HN 94-

95/81-82). Time and again, in the heat of the struggle and alienation, we envision a liberation as a conquering of that alienation... thanks to the struggle that was waged! But has that not precisely been the concept of history that Stalinism employed? Through its struggle, it promised the ultimate victory of the good, of which it saw itself as its incarnation and guarantee. But then one should not forget how that victory of the good over evil was only possible through all those forms of censure and repression, persecution and violence, deportations and camps... and so much more that actually should not have seen the light of day, but indeed were 'revealed' by Grossman in plain terms, without exaggeration, in his novel. For Marx, and especially for Lenin and Stalin, history apparently had a goal, namely the communist society. But Grossman saw how that was striven for at the price of innumerable inhumanities, meaning to say how the ideology of an ideal—entirely humane, 'messianic'—society legitimised all coercive measures and state violence, including ideological purifications, as necessary. This shakes not only Ikonnikov but also Levinas to his senses, who indeed interprets the book of Grossman as a true 'revelation.' This book reinforces his view on history, which actually becomes a view without a view on a '*telos*' or 'end goal' of history. Hence Levinas, with a feeling for some paradoxical exaggeration, states that he has no philosophy of history (RA 15; PO 34/90) in the sense that he rejects every idea of a dialectically teleological process that is directed towards the final victory of the good over

evil. He lets go of this view once and for all. There is no such thing as a fulfilment of history, to which we—in history—would be on our way and, furthermore, where such fulfilment would be ensured by God’s promise or by divinised human powers. Since Auschwitz, he no longer subscribed to such a promise since the Lord of Hosts did not intervene to protect his people from the absolute evil of extermination (EN 114/83). Apparently, God had abandoned his people Israel, which stood for humankind. That is why God can no longer be thought of as someone who intervenes in history and directs it towards Messianic fulfilment (EN 196/153). Auschwitz is the end of every theodicy, and thus also the death of God (‘Has he not died in the extermination camps? Isn’t his death thus almost an empirical fact?’) (EN 115/84). Auschwitz has introduced the inexorable end of the traditional view on ‘salvation history.’ Hence Levinas’ radical thesis that we must dare think not only of history and ethics but also of religion as a “religion without promise” (EFP 130/78): “Is one loyal to the Torah because one counts on the promise? Must I not remain faithful to its teachings, even if there is no promise? One must want to be a Jew without the promise made to Israel being the reason for this faithfulness. Judaism is valid not because of the ‘happy end’ of its history, but because of the faithfulness of this history to the teachings of the ‘Torah’” (EN 242-243/178).

Is history then entirely without prospect? Is there no promise at all anymore? In his Talmud lesson ‘Beyond

memory,’ despite the impression of the contrary, Levinas remains hanging on to the idea of a view of the future, just as it is also expressed in the Bible, namely in Isaiah: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isa 43:18-19). And this radically new, that no ear has heard and no eye has seen, is declared precisely in the preceding verses, namely the annulment and surpassing of the battle as the only way towards the good: “Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise; they are extinguished, quenched like a wick” (Isa 43:16-17). The new and unheard of that is mentioned should certainly no longer be understood as the awesome and fanatic battle of the good and its victory over evil, but the goodness that takes place in and through the *face-à-face* of the responsibility-of-the-one-for-the-other. Levinas discovers therein the true meaning of messianism, namely that every person, being responsible for the other, is Messiah. We need not wait for a Messiah who comes from elsewhere at the end of time ‘to conquer all violence with violence.’ Levinas makes the Talmudic comment of Rabbi Nahman his own: “The Messiah is the King who no longer commands from outside. The Messiah is Myself; to be Myself is to be the Messiah. The one who suffers, who has taken on the suffering of others is the Messiah. (...) All persons are the

Messiah. (...) In concrete terms this means that each person acts as though he were the Messiah. Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility” (DL 120/89-90).

Inspired by the Talmud and confirmed by Grossman-Ikonnikov, Levinas arrives at a reversal—not at an abolishment—of eschatology: “The small goodness does not win, but will never be defeated” (*la petite bonté n’a pas vaincu, mais n’a pas été vaincue non plus*) (EPA 47). As ‘incarnation’ of the ‘the one responsible for the other’ the small goodness is invincible, although it never wins! In contrast to the traditional—spectacular and violent—eschatology (comparable to the apocalyptic battle of the good against the evil ones in *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien), the small goodness does not engage in an ultimate battle against all evil in the world, for it realises it will not cope against it. But in its paltriness and weakness, it still maintains its strength, in the sense that it does not let itself be destroyed in the battle of evil against good. It stubbornly clambers to stand up, like a downtrodden blade of grass pokes fun at us behind our backs by again, slowly but resiliently, raising itself up. It is eternal, indestructible, even though it is powerless in assuring a world without violence. And note well, what is essential for its significance is that it comes without guarantees that all will be well. It is not

meaningful because it is indestructible, for then its invincibility would be a condition for its meaning and fulfilment. It takes place without worrying whether it will survive or endure. In this regard, it is unreflecting, also without any thought on *‘quid pro quo.’* Other than that, it is enough, and ‘tomorrow and the day after tomorrow,’ it is also valuable when it is aimless. If it does something here and now, the lasting significance is not needed in order to have value. In its expression, it has no need for compensation, not even for the condition of compensation of its indestructible eternity. Of course, this unconditional character does not preclude that it is unassailable: “invincible but unarmed” (HN 103/90).

This reversal of eschatology does not mean that the battle against evil becomes redundant. Racism and antisemitism, genocide and terrorism cannot be left undisturbed. We cannot remain indifferent to evil. It is only that the battle can never acquire an ultimate significance. It remains a battle with a bad conscience, or rather it *must* remain a struggle with a bad conscience. The bad conscience of that battle should never be suppressed or undone. Even the battle against evil remains standing before the ethical appeal of the non-violent face-to-face: ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ In other words, the bad conscience is the space for the small goodness that simmers up in the heart—or the soul—of people in the most impossible and abominable circumstances. Beyond and within every battle, however

historically inevitable or necessary it may be, the small goodness breaks into the open from within the ‘soul’ – the desire (cf. *supra*) – without promise as a condition for its fulfilment, i.e. without the certainty and ‘assurance’ ever of coming to fulfilment in a world ‘without death and tears.’ It is precisely its smallness and vulnerability that makes it dynamic, that namely entices it to ‘infinitisising,’ an infinity that is never infinite enough. A dynamic, ever breaking-out promise in a history without view to an end—because that history of people in this world will also never be without evil and terror.

4.6. Small goodness as ‘Rakhamim’ in the Bible

In this manner in which the small goodness opens up a ‘different’—new, reversed—future, namely not a fulfilled but an infinite—a self-infinitisising—future, Levinas recognises what the Bible calls ‘*rakhamim*’ or ‘mercy’: “A philosophy of history, a dialectic leading to peace among men—is such a thing possible after the Gulag and Auschwitz? The testimony of a fundamental book of our time such as Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, in which all the systematic safeguards of justice are invalidated and the human dehumanized, sees hope only in the goodness of one person toward another, the ‘small goodness’ I have called mercy, the *rakhamim* of the Bible” (HN 157/135).

The link that Levinas makes between small goodness and mercy has all to do with its meaning, which he makes

explicit on the basis of a word analysis. The root word of *Rakhamim* is *rekhem*, the womb, that refers back to the Aramaic term *Rakhmana*. A womb is that which is needed to bear the other than oneself until it is born: “trembling of the womb” (*frémissement des entrailles utérines*) (AV 172/142). This resonates simply with the way in which Levinas understands the responsibility-by-and-for-the-other as pregnancy, motherhood (AE 95/75): “the psyche is the maternal body” (AE 85/67). In spite of myself, I receive the other to bear within me, or rather I received the other to bear within me because preceding my conscious and free choice the other has already been ‘laid within’ me. Literally: “The psyche can signify this alterity in the same without alienation in the form of incarnation, as being-in-one’s-skin, having-the-other-in-one’s skin, the other in the same” (AE 146/114–115). At this, we return back to what we have called at the beginning of our article the ‘otherwise than being’ in the ‘being’ of the self, myself. This bearing of the other in me presupposes and expresses itself in my ‘sensibility,’ my bodily sensitivity, my despite myself being marked as such in my flesh by the other that I stand facing the other. That sensibility is no tetchiness or sentimentalism, but rather my human condition itself as ‘shock and shiver up to my guts through the other,’ my bodily touchability and vulnerability through the other than myself, because of that other. My responsibility is my incarnation: “The incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality. (I do not see what

angels could give one another or how they could help one another)” (EI 104/97). My ‘body subject’—not my material body—is ethically signatored, tattooed by the fate of the other to which I—in and through my body, and thus up to my spirit—am attuned (AE 89/71). It is not because Nietzsche and his followers have put off sensibility as ‘slave morality’ and thus have considered inferior and objectionable, that the praising of a certain weakness without cowardice, of a resilience without arms, becomes meaningless or perverse (SaS 158/183).

This way of understanding responsibility as mercy and thus as ‘uterinity’ applies in the Bible, says Levinas, not only to humans but also to God, the Infinite One: “the Eternal One is defined by Mercy”—“God as merciful is God defined by maternity. This maternal element in divine paternity is very remarkable, as is in Judaism the notion of a ‘virility’ to which limits must be set and whose partial renouncement may be symbolized by circumcision” (SaS 158/183). This is no ‘*Elohe Zebaoth*’ anymore, no God of the hosts, no onto-theological all-powerful god anymore (EN 111/81), but a God who has rid himself of that power to ‘come down from heaven’ (*kenosis*) to join the poor in the dust or the childless woman to raise her up to a laughing mother of children – or to a mother of laughing children (Ps 113:7-9) (HN 134-135/115). “Wherever you find grandeur of the Holy One, blessed be He, you will find his humility (*anvetanuto*)” (TrID 60-61/282). That is the passion of God,

that self-emptying without masochism, namely stepping out of oneself into an intimate, yet not intrusive, being concerned about the other (TrID 58-59/281-282).

This brings Levinas in the rebound to the description of the human, as was already indicated in the beginning, as ‘being connected to the other despite oneself.’ This elicits the comment from Levinas: “In the Bible man is not a rational animal; he resembles God... this is not Aristotelian at all” (TrID 40/271). That the human person is the image of God means that the human in one’s very ‘being,’ i.e. in one’s soul—in one’s body and thus up to one’s soul—is marked by the Infinite. Hence Levinas also describes the human person as bearer of the Infinite. With that, the Infinite is understood in French (*in-fini*) in its double meaning (DVI 106/63). On the one hand, the ‘in-finite’ as not finite, and thus the Infinite that is never equated with the finite human, meaning to say it remains radically transcendent (the human person is not a god in the depths of his thought – that would be idolatry). On the other hand, the Infinite is in the finite, in the sense that God’s transcendence is immanent. God is no longer the far, external, elevated, almighty, but the One who is near, stronger still, internal: “a soul within the soul” (DVI 47/23-24), deeper than myself, “*de profundis* of the spirit” (DVI 49/24). He is, to paraphrase Augustine, more intimate to me than I am to myself. The Infinite One is the ensoulment of my finitude: “theological affection” (EN 247/190). And considering that the Infinite One is also the Merciful One

(*Rakhamim*), God's ensoulment moves me towards the other. The Infinite One who ensouls me drives me 'extra-versively' out of myself and puts me on the track to the other than myself, for the sake of the other. Hence Levinas describes the Infinite-in-the-finite as "the idea of the Good in us"—"the Good in me", something "that survives the death of God" (DMT 204/177). With this, the Good should not be confused with the 'useful and pleasant,' because as 'happiness' it would still be the expression of the self-interest attempt at being (EFP 92/47, 116/66). It especially should not be confused with the idea of the collective Good that took shape in Stalinism or in Stalinistoid forms of a totalitarian or a 'totalising' and 'depersonalising' regime or institutionalism, whereby the good is turned into its own opposite. "A remarkable utopia of the Good or the secret of its beyond" (EN 260/199).

This 'trace of God in us' ensouls and inspires us to goodness, the small goodness, that thus is a trace of God—the life of God—in this world (DVI 13/XV). At the same time, Levinas remains quite critical, even atheistic, in the sense that he radically rejects God as a magical and powerful God, who as providence pulls the strings and moreover can be 'called upon' as 'the be-all and end-all' of whichever inner-worldly (historical, social) or extra-worldly (supernatural) regime. In conjunction with the 'unbelieving' Ikonnikov, Levinas articulates his religious 'ambiguity' as follows: "The essential thing in this book is simply what the character Ikonnikov says—There is neither God nor the

Good, but there is goodness’—which is also my thesis. That is all that is left to mankind. The whole novel is woven like that. Grossman has a view of ‘humanity’ which has rarely, if ever, been attained. Even he never attained it. He also says: ‘There are acts of goodness which are absolutely gratuitous, unforeseen.’ (...) Even in hatred there exists a mercy stronger than hatred. I give to this act a religious significance. This is my way of saying that the mercy of God occurs through the particular man – not at all because he is organized in a certain way or because he belongs to a society or an institution. There are acts of stupid, senseless goodness” (PO 33-34/89). Of this mercy as small goodness is Abraham its expression and incarnation: the father of Israel (*Abram, père d’Aram—père d’un peuple*) and of the whole humankind (*Abram qui devient Abraham, père de toutes les nations*), since the beginning of ‘salvation history.’ Through his concrete mercy, namely his intervention for the victims of the furious and unrelenting justice of the Just One, who wanted to uproot entirely that city of ruin, Sodom, he already installs the ‘new world’ and the ‘new humanity’ (HN 122/106), marked by the divine mercy to which Abraham in the story of Sodom converts even the Just One (HN 98-99/85-86): “the marvels of Mercy, that is, of the Spirit” (HN 100/87), “original tenderness for the other, compassion and mercy, in which unconditional goodness arises” (HN 101/88).

Conclusion: “A spirituality whose future is unknown”

And so we arrive once again where we started, namely the otherwise than being as the source and orientation for humane relationships and society. Ethics, moreover, reveals a religious signifying. The ‘for the other,’ out of which the small goodness flows forth and to which it likewise gives expression, indeed brings us closer to God: “in this spirituality the Infinite comes to pass” (AE 209/164). This spirituality is truly very radical, since it does not rest on the promise of a ‘heavenly’ fulfilment as condition for its experience by people in this world: “disinterestedness, without compensation [EE 154/90], without eternal life, without the pleasingness of happiness, complete gratuity” (AE 6/6).

This is one of the conclusions of our investigation. Due to the weightiness of this conclusion, let us—to round off—allow Levinas still a few words via some quotations: “Are we entering a moment in history in which the good must be loved without promises? May we not be on the eve of a new form of faith, a faith without triumph, as if the only refutable value were saintliness, a time when the only right to a reward would be not to expect one? The first and last manifestation of God would be to be without promises” (AT 119/109). We saw how both Grossman-Ikonnikov as well as Levinas distrust the moment in which the ‘for the other’—in the form of the small goodness—becomes the object of ‘ideological preaching’ because—precisely on the

basis of that defence and argumentation—it runs the risk of being betrayed (RA 15). “I was once asked if the Messianic idea still had meaning for me, and if it were necessary to retain the idea of an ultimate stage of history where humanity would no longer be violent, where humanity would have broken definitely through the crust of being, and where everything would be clear. I answered that to be worthy of the Messianic era one must admit that ethics has a meaning, even without the promises of the Messiah” (EI 122/114).

From the ethics of the responsibility of the one for the other, that does not count on a ‘completed time’ when everything ‘will be in order’ (“the dream of a happy eternity”), but that lives in the perspective of an ‘infinite time’ in which the practise of (small) goodness can always be done again and again (TI 261/284-285), flows forth a radically new, ethical and religious spirituality: “[The small goodness] bears witness to a new awareness of a strange (or very old) mode of spirituality or a piety without promises, which would not render human responsibility—always my responsibility—a senseless notion. A spirituality whose future is unknown” (HN 157/135). The one-for-the-other has meaning, even though there are no prophecies or “eschatological consolations” (AE 222/176) that announce a prosperous future like a ‘reward in heaven’ for the trials and humiliations suffered (HN 104/91). Is that not “the enigma of a God speaking in man and of man not counting on any

god?” (AE 196/154). That is precisely what Levinas learns from Grossman: “the sovereignty of that primordial goodness or mercy that evil cannot overcome (a goodness uncovered in the turmoil, the sign of a God still unheard-of but who, without promising anything, would seem to assume meaning beyond the theologies of a past shaken to the point of atheism) is perhaps the conclusion reached by *Life and Fate*” (HN 103/90).