

# THE WORLD INHOSPITABLE TO LÉVINAS

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All great thinkers create powerful concepts and/or images of their own but as a rule design them together with a complete universe to accommodate them and infuse them with sense. For Emmanuel Lévinas, the world he constructed was "the moral party of two," which was self-consciously a utopia in both of its inseparable senses (i.e., of no place and good place). The moral party of two was the primal scene of morality, the test-tube in which moral selves germinate and sprout. It was also the only stage on which such selves could play themselves, i.e., as *moral* beings, instead of playing scripted roles and reciting someone else's lines. The primal scene of morality is the realm of the face-to-face, of the tremendous encounter with the Other as a *Face*.

Morality, which in Lévinas' terms referred to being for the Other, has a notoriously awesome potential for love and hatred, for self-sacrifice and domination, care and cruelty. Ambivalence is its prime mover. And yet the moral party of two is capable of sustaining the universe on its own. In this party, morality does not need codes or rules, reason or knowledge, argument or conviction. It would not understand them anyway; morality is "before" all that (one cannot even say that the moral impulse is "ineffable" or "mute" since ineffability and dumbness come *after* language). The moral impulse triggered by the Face precedes speech. It sets its standards as it goes. It does not know guilt or innocence. It is pure in the only true sense of purity, the purity of *naïvety*. As Vladimir Jankélévitch has pointed out, one cannot be pure except under the condition of not having purity, that is to say of not possessing it knowingly.<sup>1</sup>

The "moral party of two," postulated by Lévinas as the birth-home and the homeland of morality, *is* naïve; it does not know (has not been told) that it is a party, let alone a moral one. Only when gazed upon from outside, does the moral party congeal into a "couple," a

"pair," a "they out there." It is the outside gaze that "objectifies" the moral party and thus makes it into a unit, a thing that can be described as it is, "handled," compared with others "like it," assessed, evaluated, and ruled on. But from the point of view of me as a moral self there is no "we," no "couple," no supra-individual entity with its "needs" and "rights."

"Inside" the moral party there is just me, with my responsibility, with my care, with the command that commands me and me alone, and there is the Face, the catalyst and the midwife. My togetherness with the Other won't survive the disappearance or the opting out of myself or the Other. There would be nothing left to "survive" that disappearance.

"Togetherness" in the "moral party" is vulnerable, weak, fragile, and lives precariously with a shadow of death never far away and all this because neither I nor the Other is replaceable. It is precisely this non-replaceability that makes our togetherness moral. Because each of us is irreplaceable, it makes no sense to think of actions in terms of "interests." There is no way in which the actions of either of us could be classified as "egoistic" or "altruistic." Good can be seen only in its opposition to evil. How can one say inside a "society" in which no one is replaceable, that what is good for one partner may be bad for another? It is inside such a "moral society," the "moral party of two," that my responsibility cannot be fathomed and "fulfilled"; it feels unlimited and becomes a whole life responsibility. It is under this condition that the command needs no argument to gain authority, nor the support of a threat of sanctions. It feels like a command, and an unconditional command at that.

But all this changes with the appearance of the *Third*. Now, true society appears, and the naïve, unruly, and unruly moral impulse, simultaneously the necessary and the sufficient condition of the "moral party," does not suffice any more.

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SUMMER 1999

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## The Moral Party Broken Into

In society, unlike in the universe of two, Lévinas' postulate of putting ethics "before ontology" sounds odd. In the party of two, priority means "being before," not "being better." The pristine, naïve togetherness of I and the Other is neither pristine nor naïve. There are now a lot of questions that can be, and are asked about that togetherness. Love now has self-love to reckon with: *Fürsein* has the *Mitsein* as its sometime competitor and always as its judge. Responsibility desperately seeks its limits; it is flatly denied that the "command" is "unconditional." Baffled, the moral impulse pauses and awaits instructions.

Now I live in a world populated, as Agnes Heller wittily put it, by "All, Some, Many and their companions. Now there is Difference, Number, Knowledge, Now, Limit, Time, Space, Freedom, Justice and Injustice, and, certainly, Truth and Falsity."<sup>2</sup> These are the main characters in the play called Society, and all of them stay far beyond the reach of my moral (now, merely intuitive) wisdom, apparently immune to whatever I may do, powerful against my powerlessness, immortal against my morality. They are secure against my blunders, so that my blunders harm me only, not Them. They are the characters who act now: as Heller puts it, "Reason reasons, Imagination imagines, Will wills, and Language speaks (*die Sprache spricht*). This is how characters became actors in their own right. They come into existence and live independently of their creators."<sup>3</sup> And all this had been made possible, nay inescapable, by the entry of the Third, that is, due to the "moral party" outgrowing its "natural" size and turning into society.

The Third is also an Other, but not the Other we encountered at the "primal scene" staged by Lévinas in which the moral play, not knowing itself to be a moral play, was scripted and directed by my responsibility alone. The "otherness" of the Third is of an entirely different order. The two "others" reside in different worlds. They are two planets each with its own orbit that does not cross with the orbit of the other, Other. Neither would survive the swapping of orbits. They do not converse with each other; when one speaks, the other one does not listen. If the other one did listen, she would not

understand what she heard. Each one can feel at home only if the other one steps aside, or better still stays outside. The Other who is a Third can be met with only if we have already left the realm of Lévinas' morality, and entered another world, the realm of *Social Order*, which is ruled by *Justice*. As Lévinas put it, "this is the domain of the State, of justice, of politics. Justice differs from charity in that it allows the intervention of some form of equality and measure, a set of social rules established according to the judgment of the State, and thus also of politics. In the domain of justice, the relationship between me and the other must leave room for the third, i.e., a sovereign judge who decides between two equals."<sup>4</sup>

What makes the Third so unlike the Other that we met in the pristine moral encounter? In his assessment of the sociological meaning for the role of the third element, Georg Simmel brought the unique and seminal role of the Third down to the fact that in any triad, "the third element is at such a distance from the other two that there exist no properly sociological interactions which concern all three elements alike."<sup>5</sup> Mutual distance, when void of encounters, congeals into "objectivity" (disinterestedness or non-commitment). From the vantage point of the Third, what was a "moral party" becomes a *group*, an entity endowed with a life of its own, a totality which is "greater than the sum of its parts."<sup>6</sup> Thus the selves can be set and seen against the "totality" and their motives against the "interest of the whole."<sup>7</sup> The selves turn into individuals who are comparable, measurable and can be judged by extra-personal, "statistically average" or "normative" standards. Under this condition, the Third is firmly placed in the position of the potential jury or umpire. Against the moral selves' hopelessly subjective and thus non-rational propulsions, the Third may now set the objective criteria of rational interests. The asymmetry of the moral relationship is all but gone. The social partners are now equal, and exchangeable, and replaceable. Actors have now to explain what they do, lay down and stand up to arguments that are made, justify themselves by reference to standards that are not of their own making. The site is cleared for norms, laws, ethical rules, and courts of justice.

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And that site must be build upon, and urgently. Objectivity, that Trojan Horse of the Third, has delivered a mortal, or at least potentially terminal blow to the affection that moved the moral partners. "A third mediating element deprives conflicting claims of their affective qualities," says Simmel; but it also deprives affection of its authority as the life-guide. Reason, understood as the enemy of passion, must step in lest disorientation and chaos should rule. Reason is what we name the *ex post-facto* accounts of actions from which passion of the naive past has been drained. Reason is what we hope will tell us what to do when passions have been tamed or extinguished. We cannot live without reason once the survival of the "group" is something else than the life of the Other that is sustained by my responsibility: once the unique Other has dissolved in the otherness of the Many. It is now a matter between my life and life of the many. Survival of the Many and my own survival being two different Survivals, I might have become an "individual," but the Other has most certainly forfeited her individuality and is dissolved in a categorical stereotype. My being-for has been split into the potentially conflicting tasks of self-preservation and the preservation of the group.

When the Other dissolves in the many, the first thing to be washed out is the Face. The Other(s) is(are) now faceless. They are *persons* (*persona* refers to mask, and masks, e.g., classes, stereotypes, that hide rather than reveal faces). It is the mask that determines who I am dealing with and what my responses ought to be. I have to learn the meaning of each *kind* of mask and memorize the responses each one calls for. But even then I cannot be totally secure. Masks may be taken on and off, they hide more than they disclose. The innocent confidence of moral drive has been replaced by the unquenchable anxiety of uncertainty. With the advent of the Third, fraud crawls in, more horrifying in its premonition than in its confirmed presence, more paralyzing still for being a non exorcizable specter. In society, one has to live with this anxiety. Whether I like it or not, I must trust the masks, not that I can trust them. Trust is the way of living with uncertainty, not a way to dispose of anxiety.

The "moral party of two" is a vast space for morality. It is large enough to accommodate

the ethical self in its full flight. It scales the highest peaks of saintliness and reaches down to the underwater reefs of moral life, the traps that must be avoided by the self before (as much as and after) it takes responsibility for its responsibility. But that party is too cramped a space for the human-being-in-the-world. It has room for no more than two actors. It leaves out most of the things that fill the daily bustle of every human being: pursuit of survival and self-aggrandizement, rational consideration of ends and means, calculation of gains and losses, pleasure, or power in politics and economics. To be in the moral space, one needs to re-enter it. Re-entry can be accomplished only by taking time-off from daily business, by bracketing off time in order to come back to the moral party of two. But can we make a comeback? The party is so starkly different from the one described by Lévinas "before ontology." I and the Other must derobe or be derobed of all social trappings, stripped of status, social distinctions, handicaps, positions, or roles. We must once more be neither rich nor poor, high or lowly, mighty or disempowered. We must be reduced to the bare essentiality of common humanity which, in Lévinas' moral universe, was given to us at birth.

### Morality's Fight for Survival

The moral self, as it is constituted inside Lévinas' moral universe, cannot but feel uncomfortable the moment the moral party of two is gate-crashed by the Third. But it is not just the moral self that feels uncomfortable, so does its producer and director, Lévinas himself. There is no better proof of his discomfort than the obsessive urgency, in later writings and interviews, to return to the "problem of the Third" and to the possibility of salvaging his description of the ethical relationship in the "presence of the Third party." There is a remarkable similarity between his attempts as he grew older to bring back into the picture (with zeal and success) what he struggled to exclude all his life, and Husserl's attempts to accommodate inter-subjectivity in the transcendental subjectivity that, all his life, he had tried to purify of all "intercontaminations" (never to anybody's, and least of all to his own, full satisfaction). The question was: is it necessary to cut the Gordian knot also in the case of Lévinasian

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ethics? Can an ethic, which is born and grows old in the safe seclusion of a greenhouse-for-two, withstand the assault by a Third party? And more to the point, can the moral capacity, made to the measure of the responsibility for the Other as Face, be vigorous enough to carry an entirely different burden of responsibility for the "Other as such," i.e., the Other without a Face?

Already in 1954, in *Le Moi et la Totalité*, Lévinas signaled an essential discontinuity between the self's relation to the Other, out of respect for the Other's freedom and integrity, and the relation towards the concept of the human being. In that second domain, the domain of totality, the other is "a free being to whom I may do harm by violating his liberty."<sup>8</sup> "Totality," sadly concluded Lévinas, "cannot constitute itself without injustice."<sup>9</sup> What is more, by itself the "totality" would not set me on the road to justice. Very much in the Husserlian spirit, Lévinas suggested that "justice does not result from the normal play of injustices. It comes from the outside, 'through the door', from beyond the mêlée and appears as a principle external to history."<sup>10</sup> Justice comes in defiance of the "theories of justice which are forged in the course of social struggles, in which moral ideas express the needs of one society or one class"; it appeals to the "ideal of justice," which requires that all needs—all of them after all are but relative—be abandoned on "approaching the absolute."<sup>11</sup> Justice comes, therefore, not out of history, but as a judgment made on history: "Human is the world in which it is possible to judge history."<sup>12</sup>

Almost thirty years passed, and in *La souffrance inutile* (1982), old worries were restated more bluntly: "Interhumanity in the proper sense lies in one's non-indifference towards the others, one's responsibility for the others, but before the reciprocity of such responsibility is inscribed into the impersonal law."<sup>13</sup> For this reason, "the interhuman perspective may survive, but may be also lost in the political order of the City or in the Law which establishes mutual obligations of the citizens."<sup>14</sup> There are—so it now seems—two mutually independent, perhaps even unconnected orders: political and ethical. "Political order—whether pre- or post-ethical—which inaugurates the social contract is neither the

sufficient condition nor the necessary outcome of ethics. In the ethical position 'I' is distinct from the citizen and from that individual who, in his natural selfishness, precedes all order yet from whom political philosophy, from Hobbes onward, tried to derive—or derived—the social and political order of the City."<sup>15</sup> It is that time-honored philosophical strategy Lévinas declared mistaken and therefore vain, but what is there to replace it, given the separation and, indeed, virtual absence of communication between the two orders?

In the same year (1982) an interview with Lévinas appeared under the title *Philosophie, Justice et Amour*.<sup>16</sup> Pressed by the questions put to him by R. Fornet and A. Gómez, Lévinas seemed to moderate his position, allowing for certain mutual dependency between political and ethical orders. "Without the order of justice," he consented, "there would be no limit to my responsibility," and thus cohabitation with Others as generalized citizens would not be possible.<sup>17</sup> "But," he hastened to qualify, "only departing from my relation to the Face, from me in front of the Other, may one speak of the State's legitimacy or illegitimacy."<sup>18</sup> Ethics born of the moral party of two shall sit in judgment when it comes to decide the State's legitimacy. And then, in response to the straightforward question "do you think that such a (just) state is possible," came the equally straightforward answer: "Yes, an agreement between the ethics and the State is possible. The just State will be the work of just people and the saints, rather than of propaganda and preaching. . ."<sup>19</sup>

*De l'Unicité* appeared two years later.<sup>20</sup> Here, an attempt is made to treat the difference between the ethical and the formal or legal in a systematic way. The difference is traced to the loss of the uniqueness of the ethical Other, the Other's dissolution in the similarity of the Individual as citizen. Such dissolution is a foregone conclusion since the appearance of "the Third"—someone different from the one close to me (*mon prochain*), but at the same time close to the one close to me and moreover close to me in his own right, is an "also close." Now there are "they." They, those various others, do things to each other, may harm each other and make each other suffer. This is the hour of justice. The uniqueness of the Other won't help much now. One needs to appeal to a force one

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could do without before, i.e., to reason, that allows us first, to "compare the incomparable," and second, to "impose a measure upon the extravagance of the infinite generosity of the 'for the Other.'"<sup>21</sup> But note, this recourse to Reason feels necessary thanks precisely to the memory of that "uniqueness" of the Other which was experienced in the moral relationship; it is because each of the multiple others is unique in her challenge to my responsibility, in her claim on my "being for," that the new situation "postulates judgement and thus objectivity, objectivation, thematization, and synthesis. One needs arbitrating institutions and the political power that sustains them. Justice requires the foundation of the State. In this lies the necessity of the reduction of human uniqueness to the particularity of a human individual, to the condition of the citizen."<sup>22</sup> That latter particularity waters down the splendor of ethically formed uniqueness; but without that already-ethically-experienced uniqueness it would itself be inconceivable, it would never come to pass.

Justice is in many ways disloyal to its ethical origins, unable to preserve its heritage in all its inner richness—but it won't be justice if it forgets its origins and tries to preserve its birthmark. "It cannot abandon that uniqueness to political history, which finds itself subjected to the determinism of power, reason of the State and the seduction of the totalitarian temptations."<sup>23</sup> It must measure itself over and over again by the standards of original uniqueness, however unattainable such standards may be among the multiplicity of citizens. Hence the indelible trait of all justice is its dissatisfaction with itself: "justice means constant revision of justice, expectation of a better justice."<sup>24</sup> Justice, one may say, must exist perpetually in a condition of *noch nicht geworden*, setting itself standards higher than those already practiced.

The same paradox is pondered at length in the extensive conversations with François Poirié. In the presence of the Third, said Lévinas, "we leave what I call the order of ethics, or the order of saintliness or the order of mercy, or the order of love, or the order of charity—where the other human being concerns me regardless of the place he occupies in the multitude, and even regardless of our shared quality as individuals of the human species. He

concerns me as one close to me, as the first to come. He is unique."<sup>25</sup> Beyond this order stretches the realm of choice, proportion, judgement and comparison. Comparison already entails the first act of violence: it is defiance of uniqueness. This violence cannot be avoided since among the multiplicity of others certain divisions (assignment to classes, to categories) are necessary because they are "justified divisions." Ethics demands, one may say, certain self-limitation; for the ethical demand to be fulfilled, certain sacred axioms of ethics must be sacrificed.

The liberal state, said Lévinas—the state grounded on the principle of human rights—is the implementation, and conspicuous manifestation, of that contradiction. Its function is nothing less than to "limit the original mercy from which justice originated." But "the internal contradiction" of the liberal state finds its expression in perceiving "beyond and above all justice already incorporated in the regime, a justice more just. . ." "Justice in the liberal state is never definitive." "Justice is awakened by charity—such charity which is before justice but also after it." "Concern with human rights is not the function of the State. It is a non-state institution inside the State—an appeal to humanity which the State has not accomplished yet." Concern with human rights is an appeal to the "surplus of charity," one may say, to something larger than any letter of Law, than anything that the State has done so far. State-administered justice is born of charity gestated and groomed within the primary ethical situation. And yet justice may be administered only if it never stops being prompted by its original *spiritus movens*; if it knows of itself as of a never ending chase of a forever elusive goal—the re-creation among the individuals/citizens of that uniqueness which is the birthmark of the Other as Face; if it knows that it cannot "match the kindness which gave it birth and keeps it alive"—but if it knows as well that it cannot ever stop trying to do just that.<sup>26</sup>

Just what can one learn from Lévinas' exploration of the "world of the Third," the "world of the multiplicity of others"—the social world? One can learn, to start with, that this world of the social is, simultaneously, the legitimate offspring, and a distortion, of the

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moral world. The idea of justice is conceived at the moment of encounter between the experience of uniqueness (as given in the moral responsibility for the Other) and the experience of multiplicity of others (as given in social life). It cannot be conceived under any other circumstances, it needs both parents and to both of them it is genetically related, even if the genes, though being complementary, also contain contradictory genetic messages. Thus, paradoxically, morality is the school of justice even if the category of justice is alien to it and within the moral relationship redundant (justice comes into its own together with comparison, but there is nothing to compare when the Other is encountered as unique). The "primal scene" of ethics is thereby also the primal, ancestral scene of social justice.

One learns also that justice becomes necessary when the moral impulse, quite self-sufficient inside the moral party of two, is found to be a poor guide once it ventures beyond the boundaries of that party. The infinity of the moral responsibility, the unlimitedness (even the silence!) of moral demand simply cannot be sustained when "the Other" appears in the plural (one may say that there is an inverse ratio between the infinity of "being for" and the infinity of the others). But it is that moral impulse which makes justice necessary: it resorts to justice in the name of self-preservation, though while doing so it risks being cut down, trimmed, maimed or watered down.

### Can Ethics Earn Its Salvation?

In the *Dialogue sur le penser-à-l'autre*, the interviewer asked Lévinas:<sup>27</sup>

As far as I am an ethical subject, I am responsible for everything in everybody; my responsibility is infinite. Is not it so that such a situation is unlivable for me, and for the other, whom I risk to terrorize with my ethical voluntarism? Does not it follow that ethics is impotent in its will to do good?<sup>28</sup>

To which Lévinas gave the following answer:

I do not know whether such a situation is unlivable. Certainly, such a situation is not what one would call agreeable, pleasant to live

with, but it is good. What is extremely important—and I can assert this without being myself a saint, and without pretending to be a saint—is to be able to say that a human truly deserving that name, in its European sense, derived from the Greeks and the Bible, is a human being who considers saintliness the ultimate value, an unassailable value.<sup>29</sup>

This value is not surrendered once the uncompromising ethical requirement of "being-for" is replaced by a somewhat diluted and less stressful code of justice. It remains what it was, the ultimate value, reserving to itself the right to invigilate, monitor, and censure all deals entered into, in the name of justice. Constant tension and never becalmed suspicion rule in the relationship between ethics and the just State. Ethics is not a derivative of the State; the ethical authority does not derive from the State powers to legislate and to enforce the Law. It precedes the State; it is the sole source of the State's legitimacy and the ultimate judge of that legitimacy. The State, one may say, is justifiable only as a vehicle or instrument of ethics.

This is much—but far too little to account for the complex social/political processes that mediate between individual moral impulses and the overall ethical effects of political actions. Lévinas' view of the ethical origins of justice and the State itself as an instrument of justice (and, obliquely, of ethics itself) neither is nor pretends to be a sociological statement. It is in its intention and its final shape a phenomenological insight into the meaning of justice; or it can perhaps be interpreted as an "etiological myth," setting the case for the subordination of the State to ethical principles and its subjection to the ethical criteria of evaluation. It can hardly be seen, though, as an insight into the process through which ethical responsibility for the other comes (or does not come, as the case may be) to be implemented on a generalized scale through the works of the State and its institution. It goes a long way towards explaining concerns with the plight of the "generalized other"—the far away Other, the Other distant in space and time; but it says little about the ways and means through which that concern may bring practical effects, and

even less about the reasons for such effects falling so saliently short of needs and expectations, or not being visible at all.

Lévinas' writings offer rich inspiration for the analysis of the endemic aporia of moral responsibility. They offer nothing comparable, though, for the scrutiny of the aporetic nature of justice. They do not confront the possibility that, as with the case of assuming moral responsibility for the Other, the work of the institutions that Lévinas wished to be dedicated to the promotion of justice can fall short of moral ideals or even have consequences detrimental to moral values. Neither did he allow for the possibility that such detrimental consequences may be more than just side-effects of mistakes and neglect, being rooted instead in the very way such institutions can—must—operate to remain viable.

Quite a few insights into the latter issue can be found in the work of Hans Jonas. Unlike Lévinas, Jonas puts our present moral quandary in historical perspective, representing it as an event in time, rather than an extemporal, metaphysical predicament. According to Jonas, for the greater part of human history the gap between "micro" and "macro" ethics did not present a problem; the short reach of the moral drive was not fraught with terminal dangers for the simple reason that the consequences of human deeds (given the technologically determined scale of human action) were equally limited. In recent times, however, the magnitude of immediate and oblique consequences of human action has grown exponentially and the growth of theory has not been matched by a similar expansion of human moral capacity. What we can do now, may have profound and radical effects on distant lands and distant generations we can neither explore nor imagine. Yet the same development which put in the hands of human kind powers, tools, and weapons of unprecedented magnitude, requiring close normative regulation, "eroded the foundations from which norms could be derived; it has destroyed the very idea of norm as such."<sup>30</sup> Both departures are the work of science that brooks no limits to what humans can do, nor easily accepts that not all that could be done should be done. The ability to do something is, for science and for technology, science's executive arm and is all the reason

needed for doing it. As Jonas points out, while new powers need new ethics, and need it badly, they simultaneously undermine the very possibility of satisfying that need by denying ethical considerations the right to interfere with, let alone to arrest, their own infinite, self-propelling growth.

This blind tendency must be reversed, Jonas demands. But how? By working out a new ethics, made to the measure of new human powers. This is a Kantian answer: what we need to pull ourselves out of our present quandary and stave off even greater catastrophes, in Jonas' view, are certain rules so apodeictically true that every sane person would accept them. We need, in other words, a sort of a categorical imperative mark two—like, for instance, "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life."<sup>31</sup>

Working out a categorical imperative for our present predicament is not easy, though. First, negation of any of the candidates for the "imperative mark two" status, unlike the original, Kantian imperative, does not entail logical contradiction. Secondly, it is notoriously difficult, nay impossible, to know for sure which actions inspired by the progress of technoscience are, and which are not "compatible with the permanence of genuine human life"—at least not before the damage, often irreparable, has been done. Even in the unlikely case of the new categorical imperative having been awarded unchallenged normative authority, the vexing question of its application would still remain open: how to argue convincingly that a controversial development should be stopped, if its effects cannot be measured in advance with such a degree of precision, with that near algorithmic certainty, which scientific reason would be inclined to respect? If a truly algorithmic calculation of the looming dangers is not in the cards, Jonas suggests, we should settle for its second-best substitute, a "heuristics of fear": to try our best to visualize the most awesome and the most durable among the consequences of given technological action.<sup>32</sup> Above all, we need to apply the "principle of uncertainty": "The prophecy of doom is to be given greater heed than the prophecy of bliss."<sup>33</sup> We need, Jonas implies, a kind of "systematic pessimism ethics"—so that we may err, if at all, solely on the side of caution.<sup>34</sup>

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Kant's trust in the grip of ethical law rested on the conviction that there are arguments of reason which every reasonable person, being a reasonable person, must accept; the passage from ethical law to moral action led through rational thought—and to smooth the passage one needed only to take care of the non-contradictory rationality of the law, counting for the rest on the endemic rational faculties of moral actors. In this respect, Jonas stays faithful to Kant—though he is the first to admit that nothing as uncontroversial as Kant's categorical imperative (that is, no principle which cannot be violated without violating simultaneously the logical law of contradiction) can be articulated in relation to the new challenge to human ethical faculties. For Jonas, as for Kant, the crux of the matter is the capacity of the legislative reason; and the promotion, as well as the eventual universality, of ethical conduct is ultimately a philosophical problem and the task of the philosophers. For Jonas, as for Kant, the fate of ethics is fully and truly in the hands of Reason and its spokesmen, the philosophers. In this scheme of things there is no room left for the possibility that reason may, in some other of its incarnations, militate against what is, in its name, promoted by ethical philosophers.

In other words, there is no room left for the logic of human interests, and the logic of social institutions—those organized interests whose function is, in practice if not by design, to do exactly the opposite to what Kantian ethical philosophy would expect them to do: namely, to make the bypassing of ethical restrictions feasible and ethical considerations irrelevant to the action. Neither is there room left for the otherwise trivial sociological observation that for the arguments to be accepted they need to accord with interests in addition (or instead of) being rationally flawless. There is no room either for another equally trivial phenomenon of “unanticipated consequences” of human action—of deeds that bring results left out of account, or unthought-of at the time the action was undertaken. Nor is there room for the relatively simple guess that when interests are many and at odds with each other, any hope that a certain set of principles will eventually prevail and will be universally obeyed must seek support in a sober analysis of social and

political forces capable of incurring that victory.

I suggest that a mixture of all those factors—overlooked or ignored and left out of account in Jonas' search for the new ethics—can be blamed for the curious paradox of our times, in which the growing awareness of the dangers ahead goes hand in hand with the growing impotence in preventing them or alleviating the gravity of their impact. In theory, we seem to know that if catastrophe is to be averted, the presently unruly forces must be kept in check and controlled by other factors than endemically disperse and diffuse, as well as short-sighted, interests. In practice, however, the consequences of human actions rebound with a blind, elemental force reminiscent more of earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes than of the model of rational and self-monitored behavior. As Danièle Sallenave has reminded us, Jean-Paul Sartre could aver a few decades ago that “there are no such things as natural disasters”; but today natural disasters have turned into the prototype and model of all the miseries that afflict the world, and one could as well reverse Sartre's statement and say that “there are no other than natural catastrophes.”<sup>35</sup> Not just the dramatic changes in the degree of livability of our natural habitat (pollution of air and water, global warming, ozone holes, acid rains, salination or dessication of the soil etc.), but also the thoroughly human aspects of global conditions (wars, demographic explosions, mass migrations and displacements, outbursts of ethnic hostilities, growing gaps between rich and poor, social exclusion of large categories of population) come unannounced, catch us unaware and seem utterly oblivious to the anguished cries for help and to the most frantic efforts to design, let alone to provide, the remedy.

### **Ethics Under Siege**

But a categorical imperative mark two and a heuristics of fear do not move us to follow Jonas's ethical strategy. A dearth of ethical knowledge and understanding cannot be blamed for what is happening. No one except lunatic fringes would seriously argue that it is good and beneficial to pollute the atmosphere, to pierce the ozone layer, to wage wars, to overpopulate the land, to deprive people of their



livelihood or to make them into homeless vagabonds. Yet all this happens despite its consensual, almost universal and vociferous condemnation. Some factors other than ethical ignorance, or philosophers' inability to agree on principles, must be at work if the grinding, systemic consistency of the global damage outmatches the cohesion of ethical indignation. One may sensibly surmise that those other factors are entrenched in aspects of social reality that are unaffected by ethical philosophy, or are unable to withstand or bypass its pressures; or better still, to render ethical demands inaudible or—if audible—ineffective.

Among such factors, the increasingly deregulated market forces, exempt from all effective political control and guided solely by the pressures of competitiveness must be awarded the pride of place. Thanks to technical advances aided and abetted by the progressive dismantling of political constraints, capital is now free to move whenever and wherever it desires. The potential promoters and guardians of social justice have been deprived of the economic muscle to enforce ethical principles. Political institutions stay local, while the real powers which decide the shape of things have acquired a genuine ex-territoriality. As Manuel Castells puts it in his monumental three-volume study of *The Information Age*, power in the form of capital, and particularly financial capital, flows—while politics remains tied to the ground bearing all the constraints imposed by its local character.<sup>36</sup> Power has been, we may say, “emancipated from politics.” But when this happens, the State in which Lévinas invested his hopes for the promotion of morally inspired justice becomes wishful thinking. It is increasingly difficult to locate an agency capable of undertaking the task of implementing the new categorical imperative that Jonas sought. As a consequence, we may say that the problem of applying Lévinas' ethics to the troubles of a contemporary world is first and foremost the question of an agency gap.

Mobility has become the most powerful and most coveted stratifying factor; it is the stuff out of which new, increasingly worldwide, social, political, economic, and cultural hierarchies are daily built and rebuilt. The mobility acquired by the owners and managers of capital is new, indeed unprecedented, in its radical

unconditionality and its disconnection of power from obligation. Mobility disconnects employers from duties towards employees, towards the younger, weaker and yet unborn generations—towards the self-reproduction of the living conditions of all. In short, mobility provides freedom from the duty to contribute to daily life and the perpetuation of the community. There is a new asymmetry emerging between the exterritorial nature of power and the continuing territoriality of the “whole life” of a locality—which the now unanchored powers, able to move at short notice or without warning, are free to exploit and abandon. Shedding responsibility for consequences is the most coveted and cherished gain that the new mobility brings to free-floating, locally-unbound capital. The costs of coping with consequences need not be counted in the calculation of the “effectiveness” of investment.

This new freedom of capital brings to mind the absentee landlords of yore, notorious for their resented neglect of the needs of the populations that fed them. Creaming off the “surplus product” from the land they owned was their sole interest. There is certainly some similarity here but the comparison does not do full justice to the kind of freedom from worry and responsibility which the mobile capital of the late twentieth century has acquired, that absentee landlords could not secure.

In contradistinction to the absentee landlords of early modern times, the late-modern capitalists and land-brokers (thanks to the new mobility of their by now liquid resources) do not encounter limits sufficiently real—solid, tough, resistant enough—to enforce compliance. The limits that can make themselves felt are those administratively imposed on the free movement of capital and money. Such limits are few and far between and the handful that remain are under tremendous pressure. The moment when those on the receiving side—targeted or accidental victims of the profit-making drive—try to flex their muscle and make their strength felt, the capital has little difficulty packing its tents and finding more hospitable environment. Capital has no need to engage with consequences, if avoidance will do.

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Rather than homogenizing the human condition, the technological and political annulment of temporal/spatial distances tends to polarize it. The emancipation of certain human beings from territorial constraints renders community-generating meanings extraterritorial, and at the same time, denudes the territory of its meaning and its identity-endowing capacity, yet those left behind go on being confined to it. For some people capital provides unprecedented freedom, for others, it portends the impossibility to appropriate and domesticate the locality from which they have little chance of cutting themselves free in order to move elsewhere. If distances no longer mean very much, localities lose much of their meaning. Some people move out of a locality at will, while others watch helplessly as the ground washes out from under their feet.

Information floats independently from its carriers. Bodies shift and rearrange in physical space. For some people—for the mobile elite, the elite of mobility—that means literally, the “dephysicalization” or the new weightlessness of power. Elites travel in space and travel faster than ever before, but the spread and density of the power web they weave is not dependent on that travel. Thanks to the new “body-less-ness” of power, in its mainly financial form, the power-holders become truly extraterritorial even if, bodily, they happen to stay “in place.” Their power is not “out of this world,” not out of the physical world; they do build heavily guarded homes and offices. They are extraterritorial in the sense that they are free from intrusion, from unwelcome neighbors, cut off from what may be called a local community and inaccessible to whoever is, unlike them, confined to it.

And so another gap yawns—alongside that of the agency. This gap grows and widens between the meaning-making elites and all the rest. In the same way that today’s power-holders remind us of pre-modern absentee landlords, so the learned, cultivated and culturally creative elites show striking similarity to the similarly extraterritorial, Latin-speaking and writing scholastic elites of medieval Europe. It seems that the modern nation-building episode was the sole exception to a much more permanent rule. The excruciatingly difficult task of re-forging the mishmash

of languages, cults, lores, customs, and ways of life into homogenic nations under homogenic rule, for a time brought the learned elites into direct engagement with “the people.” (Both “intellectuals” and the “people,” as well as the link between knowledge and power, are modern inventions!). With that episode by and large over—at least in the affluent part of the globe, the home of the most influential section of the cultural elite—there seems to be no need for continuing that engagement. Cyberspace, securely anchored in web-sites on the Internet, is the contemporary equivalent of mediaeval Latin, i.e., the space that the learned elite of today inhabit. There is little the residents of that space could talk about with those still hopelessly mired in an all-too-real physical space. Nor could they gain anything from that dialogue. The word “people” is quickly falling out of fashion, except during electoral campaigns.

The new states, and longer-living ones in their present condition, are no longer expected to perform most of the functions once seen as the *raison d’être* of nation-state bureaucracies. The function that has most conspicuously dropped out, or was torn out, of the hands of the orthodox state, is the maintenance (as Cornelius Castoriadis put it in *La Montée de l’insignifiance*) of a dynamic equilibrium between the rhythms of the growth of consumption and the elevation of productivity. This task led sovereign states at various times to impose intermittently import or export bans, custom barriers, or state-managed Keynes-style stimulation of internal demand.<sup>37</sup> The control of dynamic equilibrium is now beyond the means, and indeed beyond the ambitions, of almost all so-called sovereign (in the strictly order-policing sense) states. The very distinction between the internal and the global market, or more generally between the “inside” and the “outside” of the state, is exceedingly difficult to maintain in any but the most narrow, “territory-and-population policing” sense.

All three legs of the sovereignty tripod—economic, military and cultural—have been shattered. The state is no longer capable of balancing its books, guarding its territory or promoting its distinctive identities; contemporary states turn more and more into executors and plenipotentiaries of forces that they have

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no hope of controlling politically. In the incisive verdict of a radical Latino-American political analyst (reported in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1997), thanks to the new "porousness" of all allegedly "national" economies, and to the ephemeral, elusive, non-territorial dimensions of space in which they operate, global financial markets impose their laws and precepts on the planet.<sup>38</sup> Globalization is nothing more than a totalitarian extension of their logic on all aspects of life. States have not enough resources or freedom of movement to withstand the pressure, for the simple reason that "a few minutes is enough for enterprises and the states themselves to collapse" (as witnessed quite recently, we may add, in the case of Mexico, Malaysia, or South Korea). In the cabaret of globalization, the state goes through a striptease and by the end of the performance it is left with the bare necessities: its powers of repression. With its material basis destroyed, its sovereignty and independence annulled, its political class effaced, the nation-state becomes a simple security service for mega-companies. The new masters of the world have no need to govern directly. National governments are charged with the task of administering affairs on their behalf.

The "economy" is being progressively emptied from political control; indeed the prime meaning conveyed by the term "economy" is that of "the area of the non-political." The state is not allowed to touch what concerns economic life: any attempt in this direction is met with prompt and furious punitive action by the world markets: hence, the economic impotence of the state. According to the calculations of René Passet, purely speculative inter-currency financial transactions reach the total volume of 300 billion dollars a day. This is fifty times greater than the volume of all commercial exchanges and almost equal to the total of one 500 billion dollars for the reserves of all the "national banks" of the world.<sup>39</sup> "No state therefore," Passet comments, "can resist for more than a few days the speculative pressures of the 'market.'" The sole economic task the state is allowed, is to handle and secure an equilibrated budget by policing and keeping in check the local pressures for more vigorous state intervention in the running of businesses and for the defense of the population from the

more sinister consequences of market anarchy. As Jean-Paul Fitoussi has recently pointed out:

Such programs, though, cannot be implemented unless in one way or another economy is taken out from the field of politics. A ministry of finances remains certainly a necessary evil, but ideally one would dispose of the ministry of economic affairs (that is, of the governing of economy). In other words, the government should be deprived of its responsibility for macroeconomic policy.<sup>40</sup>

For their liberty of movement and for their unconstrained freedom to pursue their ends, global finance, trade and information industries depend on the political fragmentation, the *morcellement*, of the world scene. They all, one may say, have developed vested interests in weak states, that is, in states that are weak but nevertheless remain states. Deliberately or subconsciously, such interstate, supra-local institutions—as have been brought into being and are allowed to act with the consent of the global capital—exert coordinated pressures on all member or dependent states to systematically destroy everything which could stem or slow down the free movement of capital and limit market liberty. Throwing open the gates and abandoning any thought of autonomous economic policy is the preliminary condition of eligibility for financial assistance from world banks and monetary funds, a condition that gains meek compliance. Weak states are precisely what the New World Order, all too often looking suspiciously like a new world disorder, needs to sustain and reproduce itself. Weak, quasi states are easily reduced to the (useful) role of local police precincts, securing the modicum of order required for the conduct of business; it need not be feared that they will put the brakes on the global companies' freedom.

The separation of economy from politics, and the exemption of the first from regulatory intervention of the second resulting in the disempowerment of politics as an effective agency, augurs much more than just a shift in the distribution of social power. As Claus Offe points out, political agency as such, i.e., "the capacity to make collectively binding choices and to carry them out" has become problem-

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atic.<sup>41</sup> "Instead of asking what is to be done, we might more fruitfully explore whether there is anybody capable of doing whatever needs to be done."<sup>42</sup> Since "borders have become penetrable" (highly selectively, to be sure), "sovereignties have become nominal, power anonymous, and its locus empty."<sup>43</sup> We have not yet reached the ultimate destination; the process goes on, and seemingly is unstoppable. "The dominant pattern might be described as 'releasing the brakes': deregulation, liberalization, flexibility, increasing fluidity, and facilitating the transactions on the financial real estate and labor markets, easing the tax burden, etc."<sup>44</sup> The more consistently this pattern is applied, the less power remains in the hands of the agency that promotes it; and the less can an increasingly resourceless agency retreat from following the pattern, even if it wished or felt pressed to do so.

One of the seminal consequences of the new global freedom of movement is that it becomes increasingly difficult, perhaps altogether impossible, to re-forge social issues into effective collective action. Sections of societies traditionally charged with the task of re-forging increasingly look the other way; nothing in their own position and socially framed vocations prompts them to take up the role which dropped, or was torn, out of their hands. These two significant departures, taken together, make the present-day world ever less hospitable to Lévinas' ethics, while the clarion calls of Hans Jonas bear uncanny resemblance to crying in the wilderness.

### The Case of the New Poor

One phenomenon of the contemporary world provides a spectacular case of the overall trend: the fast-growing inequality of income and living conditions (the quality of health, education or housing, life prospects, range of life choices and longevity of life). In the increasingly affluent world, the ranks of the poor are steadily expanding, and in the last decades expanding at a steadily accelerating rate. Growing poverty is universally known and universally condemned; for an important majority, those better off, it is also a matter of shame; there is an urge not to stay idle but to do something to efface the stain on their conscience. Time and again, the miserable lot of the poor is

brought dramatically into global awareness by widely publicized cases of famine and destitution, prompting spouts of massive charity. And yet the phenomenon grows instead of going away. Moral sensibility stops short of being re-forged in the daily and effective concern with inter-societal, let alone global, justice.

The poor will always be with us (so the popular wisdom insists), but what it means to be poor depends on the kind of "us" the poor are "with." It was not the same to be poor in a society of half a century or more ago. That was a society that needed every single adult member to engage in productive labor. Our society, thanks to the enormous powers accumulated by centuries of labor, may well produce everything needed, and much more, without the participation of a large and growing section of its members. It is one thing to be poor in a society of producers and universal employment; it is quite different to be poor in a society of consumers, in which life projects are built around consumer choices rather than work, professional skills, or jobs. If "being poor" derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed in an earlier time, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of being flawed consumers. This is a difference which truly makes a difference in the way living in poverty is experienced and in the chances and prospects to redeem its misery.

Societies have typically taken a characteristically ambivalent attitude toward the poor, reflected in an uneasy mixture of fear and revulsion on one hand, and pity and compassion on the other. Both ingredients in the social attitude were equally indispensable. The first allowed for the harsh treatment of the poor which the defense of order required; the second underlined the pitiful lot of those who fell below the standards, a lot that made all the hardships of following the norm for the norm-abiding part of the population, pale into insignificance. The latter circumstance awarded the poor a useful role in the promotion of obedience to noxious and stringent social norms of the time. Depending on its specific model of order and norm, each society constructs its poor in its own image, offering different explanations for their presence, finding a different use for the poor and deploying different strategies for tackling the problem of poverty.

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Pre-modern Europe came closer than its modern successor to finding an important function for its poor. The poor, like everybody else and everything else in pre-modern Christian Europe, were Children of God—a legitimate and indispensable link in the “Divine Chain of Beings”; as part of God’s creation they were, like the rest of the world before its modern desacralisation or “disenchantment,” saturated with meaning and purpose. The poor suffered, but their misery made them blessed, since their suffering was repentance for original sin and a warrant of redemption. It was up to the more fortunate to bring succor and relief to the sufferers and so to practice charity and in the process gain their own share in salvation. The presence of the poor was therefore God’s gift to everyone else: an occasion to practice self-sacrifice, to live a virtuous life, to repent from sin and to earn heavenly bliss. One can almost say that a society which sought the meaning of earthly life in life-after-death would need to invent another vehicle of personal salvation, were the poor not already at hand.

This was no longer the case in the “disenchanted” world of modernity, in which nothing that was had the right to be merely because of the accident of being there, and in which everything that was had to show a legitimate and reasonable proof of its right to be. Most importantly, the brave new world of modernity was one that set its own rules and took nothing for granted, subjecting everything extant to the incisive scrutiny of reason, recognizing no limits to its own authority—and above all rejecting the “power of the dead over the living,” the authority of tradition, inherited lore or custom. The projects of order and the norm now replaced the placidly accepted, preordained, Divine Chain of Beings. Unlike the vision it replaced, order and norm were human products; they were designs yet to be implemented by human action—things to be yet made or built, not things found and meekly addressed. If inherited reality did not match the projected order, all the worse for reality.

And so the presence of the poor became a problem (“problem” is something which causes discomfort, is illegitimate or abnormal, and thus prompts the urge to “resolve” it—to cure or to remove it). The poor were a threat

and an obstacle to order; they also defied the norm.

The poor were double jeopardy. Since their poverty was no more the verdict of Providence, there was no reason why they should humbly and gratefully accept their lot; they had reasons to complain and rebel against the more fortunate, who they blamed for their deprivation. On the other hand, the old Christian ethics of charity appeared now an intolerable burden, a drain on the nation’s wealth. The duty to share one’s good fortune with those who failed to curry fortune’s favors was no longer a sensible investment in life-after-death; charity “did not stand to reason”—certainly not to the reason of the business of life here and now, on earth.

Soon a third threat was added to the other two: the poor who compliantly accepted their plight as Divine verdict and made no effort to extricate themselves from their misery, proved immune to blandishment to factory work and refused to sell their labor once the meager needs they grew accustomed to, and perceived as “natural,” had been gratified. The early decades of industrial society were plagued by constant shortages of labor. The poor who were satisfied with their lot, or resigned to it, were a nightmare for industrial entrepreneurs: they were immune and unresponsive to the inducements of regular wages and saw no reason why they should go on bearing with the long hours of drudgery once they had enough bread to see them through the day. A vicious circle began: the poor objecting to their misery spelled rebellion or revolution; the poor reconciled to their misery curbed and hampered the progress of industrial enterprise. Forcing the poor into perpetual factory labor seemed the miraculous way to square the circle.

And so the poor of the industrial era were re-defined as the reserve army of labor, employment, steady employment; employment which left no room for mischief, had become a norm—while poverty had been identified with unemployment, breaching of the norm, an anomaly. Under the circumstances, the obvious prescription for curing poverty and nipping it in the bud, was to induce the poor, or force them if need be, to accept the lot of factory labor. The most obvious means to achieve that effect was to deprive the poor of any other source of livelihood: accept the conditions on

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offer, however repulsive they might be and however deeply you might resent them, or forfeit all hope for a helping hand.

Strictly speaking, given that no alternative was available, preaching about ethical duty was superfluous. And yet the work ethic was viewed almost universally as useful, perhaps indispensable medicine for the triple ailment of poverty, the insufficient supply of labor, and the threat of revolution. Opting for the work ethic was made much easier, indeed it seemed obvious and natural because the middle classes were already converted to it and viewed their own life in its light.

If one follows politicians, economists and other spokesmen for the public mood, one can be excused for getting an impression that the poor of today have retained the function assigned to them in the early years of the new, modern and industrial era as a reserve army of labor. Just as it did in the heyday of industrial expansion, this assignment casts doubt and suspicion on the probity of those not in active service, and points the way to bringing them back into line. This impression is false, though. The philosophy which once tried to grasp and articulate emerging realities of the industrial age has outlived its purpose and lost touch with the new reality emerging at the end of the modern age. The work ethic, which casts the poor in the role of the "reserve army of labor" began its life as a revelation; it leads its posthumous life as a cover-up.

Grooming the poor of today into the laborers for tomorrow used to make economic and political sense: it lubricated the wheels of an industry-based economy and served well the task of "social integration," that is, of order-maintenance and normative regulation. Neither of the two senses holds anymore in a postmodern, consumer, society. The present-day economy does not need a massive labor force. It has learned how to increase, not just profits, but the volume of its products while cutting down on labor and its costs. At the same time, the obedience to norm and "social discipline" in general are by and large secured through the allurements and seductions of the commodity market, rather than through state-managed coercion and the drill administered by the network of panoptical institutions. Economically and politically, the late-modern

or postmodern society of consumers may thrive, without dragging the bulk of its members through the millstones of industrial labor. For all practical intents and purposes, the poor cease to be a reserve army of labor, and invocations to the work ethic sound increasingly nebulous and out-of-touch with the realities of the day.

Contemporary society engages its members primarily as consumers; only secondarily, and partly, does it engage them in the role of producers. To meet the norm, to be a fully-fledged member of society, one needs to respond promptly and efficiently to the temptations of the consumer market; one needs to contribute to the "supply-clearing demand" and in the case of economic trouble be part of the "consumer-led recovery." The poor do not fit in: they lack a decent income, credit cards and the prospect of a better time. Accordingly, the norm which is broken by the poor, which makes them "abnormal," is the norm of consumer competence or aptitude, not that of employment. First and foremost, the poor of today are "non-consumers," not "unemployed"; they are defined in the first place through being flawed consumers—since the most crucial of the social duties which they do not fulfill is that of the active and effective buyers of goods and services that the market offers. In a book-balancing consumer society, the poor are unequivocally a liability, and by no stretch of the imagination can they be recorded on the side of present or future assets.

And so for the first time in recorded history, the poor are now purely and simply a worry and a nuisance. They have no merits that relieve, let alone balance, their vices. They have nothing to offer in exchange for the "taxpayer's" outlay of resources. They are a bad investment, unlikely ever to repay, let alone bring profit. They are a black hole, sucking in whatever comes near and spitting back nothing—except, perhaps, trouble. Decent and normal members of society—true consumers—want nothing from them and expect nothing. The poor are totally useless. No one who truly counts, speaks, and is heard, needs them. For them, it is zero tolerance. Society would be much better off if the poor just burnt their tents and left. The world would be that much more pleasant without them. The poor

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are not needed. They are unwanted. And because they are unwanted, they can be, without much regret or compunction, forsaken.

Not surprisingly, the Welfare State is in retreat virtually everywhere. The few countries where its provisions are yet intact or are being dismantled slowly or half-heartedly, are alternatively reproached or ridiculed for their imprudence and obsolescence by the chorus of current economic authorities. They are warned by economic sages and world banking institutions against the impending "overheating of the economy" and other freshly invented horrors. The sole choice brandished in front of governments by current economic wisdom depicts a choice between fast rising unemployment, as in Europe, and the even faster fall of lower class income, as in the USA.

The poor of today are not only banished from the streets and other public places used by normal people. They are out of sight and out of heart: physical isolation is reinforced with mental separation, resulting in the banishment of the useless, "iniquitous" poor from the universe of moral empathy, the community of human beings, and the world of ethical duty. This is accomplished by rewriting their story, using the language of depravity to replace the language of deprivation. The poor supply the "usual suspects," rounded up when the public hue-and-cry detects a fault in the habitual order. The poor are portrayed as lax, sinful, and devoid of moral standards. The media cheerfully cooperate with the police in presenting to the sensation-greedy public lurid pictures of the crime-, drug- and sexual promiscuity-infested "criminal elements" who find their shelter in the darkness of mean streets. And so the point is made that the question of poverty is, first and foremost, perhaps solely, the question of law and order—an issue of lawbreaking. Once it stops being an ethical problem, poverty tends to be criminalized.

All this is bad news for the prospects of moral sensitivity and responsibility for the Other who needs help. This is not the whole story, though, since—as Norberto Bobbio alerts us, "even if we console ourselves by saying that in this part of the world we have created affluence for two-thirds, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that in the majority of countries two-thirds, or even four-fifths or

nine-tenths, are experiencing the opposite."<sup>45</sup> And yet most of us, most of the time, do close our eyes.

As Ryszard Kapuscinski, one of the most formidable chronographers of contemporary living, has recently explained, that effect is achieved by three interconnected expedients consistently applied by the media which preside over the charity fairs during which the plight of the poor is recalled, only to vanish back into oblivion shortly afterwards.<sup>46</sup>

First, the news of a successive famine or another wave of uprooting and enforced homelessness in some far-away countries come as a rule coupled with the reminder that the same distant lands where the people "as seen on TV" die of famine and disease are the birthplace of "Asian tigers." It does not matter, that all the "tigers" together embrace no more than a tiny per cent of the population of Asia alone. They are assumed to demonstrate what was to be proved—that the sorry plight of the hungry and the homeless is their *sui generis* choice—alternatives are available, but not taken, because they lack industry or resolve. The underlying message is that the poor themselves bear responsibility for their fate. They could, as the "tigers" did, choose a life of work and thrift instead—but apparently decided not to, due to inferior intelligence or the lack of virtue.

Second, the news is so scripted and edited that it reduces the problem of poverty and deprivation to the question of hunger alone. This stratagem achieves two effects in one go: the real scale of poverty is played down (800 million people are permanently undernourished, but something like four billion—two thirds of the world population—live in poverty), and the task ahead is limited to finding food for the hungry. But, as Kapuscinski points out, such a presentation of the problem of poverty (as exemplified by one of *The Economist's* recent issues analyzing world poverty under the heading "How to Feed the World") "terribly degrades, virtually denies full humanity to people whom we want, allegedly, to help." What the equation "poverty = hunger" conceals, are many other and complex aspects of poverty—"horrible living and housing conditions, illness, illiteracy, aggression, falling apart families, weakening of social bonds, lack

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of future, and non-productiveness"—afflictions that cannot be cured with high-protein biscuits and powdered milk. Kapuscinski remembers wandering through African townships and villages and meeting children "who begged me not of bread, water, chocolate or toys, but a ballpoint pen, since they went to school and had nothing to write their lessons with."

Let us add that all associations of the horrid pictures of famine presented by the media with the plight of the poor accused of violating the principles of the work ethic, are carefully avoided. People are shown together with their hunger—but however the viewers strain their eyes, they would not see a single work tool, plot of arable land or head of cattle in the picture. As if there was no connection between the emptiness of the work ethic's promises in a world that needs no more labor, and the plight of people offered as an outlet for pent-up moral impulses. The work ethic emerges from this exercise unscathed—ready to be used again as a whip to chase the poor nearer home away from the shelter they seek in vain in the Welfare State.

Third, the spectacles of disasters, as presented by the media, support and reinforce the ordinary, daily moral withdrawal in another way, apart from unloading the accumulated supplies of moral sentiments. Their long-term effect is that "the developed part of the world surrounds itself with a sanitary belt of uncommitment; it erects a global Berlin Wall. All information coming from 'out there' are pictures of war, murders, drugs, looting, contagious diseases, refugees and hunger; that is, of something threatening," revolting and repulsive. Only rarely, and in a half-voice with no connection to scenes of civil wars and massacres, do we hear of the murderous weapons used, and even less often are we reminded of what we know but prefer not to be told about: that all those weapons used to make far-away homelands into killing fields have been supplied by our arms factories, jealous of their order-books and proud of their competitiveness, which is the lifeblood of our own cherished prosperity. A synthetic image of the self-inflicted brutality sediments in public consciousness: an image of "mean streets," "no go areas" writ large, a magnified rendition

of a gangland, an alien, subhuman world beyond ethics and beyond salvation. The message is that attempts to save that world from the worst consequences of its own brutality may bring only momentary effects which in the long run are bound to fail; all the lifelines thrown eventually become nooses for the poor to hang themselves.

Next, the best-tried, most trusty tool of "adiaphorisation": the exemption of conduct from ethical significance and evaluation, comes into its own: the sober, rational calculation of costs and effects. Money spent on this kind of people is money wasted. Wasting money is one thing that, as everybody will readily agree, we cannot afford. The victims of famine are not ethical subjects. Our own stance toward them is not a moral issue. Morality is for carnivals only, the spectacular, instantaneous, short-lived, explosive condensations of pity and compassion. When it comes to our, the affluent's, collective responsibility for the continuing misery of the world's poor, economic calculation takes over, and the rules of free trade, competitiveness and productivity replace ethical precepts. When economy speaks, ethics better keep silent.

Unless, of course, it is the work ethic. This is the sole variant which the economic rule tolerates: an ethics which (contrary to Lévinas' image of ethics and the idea of justice as whips for the sinners and watchdogs for the rulers) is not an adversary of the economy bent on profitability and competitiveness, but its necessary support and supplement. For the affluent part of the world and the affluent sections of well-off societies, the work ethic is a one-sided affair. It spells out the duties of those who struggle with the task of survival; it says nothing about the duties of those who rose above mere survival and went on to more elevated, loftier concerns. In particular, it denies the dependency of the first upon the second, and so releases the second from responsibility for the first.

Today, the work ethic is instrumental in bringing the idea of "dependency" (which, in the last account, is nothing but the flip side of our moral responsibility) into disrepute. "Dependency" is, increasingly, a dirty word and so also, by proxy is the idea of ethical responsibility. The Welfare State is accused of cultivating

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dependency, of raising it to the level of a self-perpetuating culture and this is a crowning argument for dismantling it. Moral responsibility is the first victim of this holy war against dependency. But the dependency of the Other (it needs to be repeated over and over again) is but a mirror image of my responsibility, the

starting point of any moral relationship and the founding assumption of all moral action. To denigrate the dependency of the poor and describe it as sin, the work ethic, in its present rendition, brings relief mostly to the moral scruples of the affluent.

## ENDNOTES

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