

# Effacing the Face: On the Social Management of Moral Proximity

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*Fellow feeling is not a consequence, but a presupposition, of the possibility of any kind of sociality. (Max Scheler)*

Moral ignorance, moral ineptitude or moral depravity mark the non-social man of social thought. The non-social man lives nowhere but in social thought. There, however, live he must, if only as the unlit and unspeakable *beyond* of what might be said: the compulsion and apology of the speech and the silent witness to the truth of the spoken. He must shimmer (as Derrida would say) *sous rature*, so that the world of social thought can be lit. He must stand condemned for this world to need no exoneration. He must be remembered in his death or his exile, so that living society can forget to self-interrogate.

Generations of Christian theologians worked to reforge Adam's fall into the original sin of man. Jesus, social rebel and moral prophet, knew of no original sin, as He hoped to uncover the divine in man. The Church needed sinners to claim its own divinity. To sustain its redemptive power the Church needed men incapable of redeeming themselves: men who inherited from Adam his exile from Eden and his loss of freedom to choose Good over Evil.

While reflecting on the fading glory of other-worldly salvation and rising attraction of this-worldly happiness, the secular successors of the theologians still found men wicked. They found them incapable of living in peace, rather than of dying in grace. Not the stigma of Adam's sin, but greed and lust for power was now man's incurable affliction. The modern state needed unruly men to claim its power to rule. To sustain its ordering power the state needed men incapable of living in order: men who would cut each others' throats, were not the knives in the state's safe keeping.

Third in line after theology and political philosophy, social

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sciences wove the narrative fabric of man's moral insufficiency. Man stood now as wilderness against civilization, as passion against reason, instinct against rationality. Modern society needed irrational man to claim its own rationality. To sustain its right to define humanity, it needed the animal in man.

Sinfulness, wickedness, animality all belonged to the category of myths that compose *political formulae* (Mosca) — the myths deployed in the service of rule (not necessarily in the service of particular ruling classes, but rather of the type of order which they rule and which gives shape and meaning to their ascendancy). They also belonged to the category of *culturally self-authenticating devices*, 'used not only to denigrate a specific condition or state of being but also to confirm the value of their dialectical antitheses' (White, 1972: 4).

Which does not mean that the charges raised against man were not descriptive: that they did not *correspond* with the reality of human existence. Yet the reality with which they corresponded was already invested with meaning, and pre-defined. Above all, it was brought into being by the practices these charges both reflected and serviced. Self-authenticating descriptions intertwined with the reality they purported to describe. As is the case with all interpretations, they belonged to the text they interpreted.

Modern secularization meant the passage of *pastoral power* (Foucault) from the Church to the modern state and society. In the course of this passage, the formula of the pastorate changed, but not the bond it articulated. At each stage the formula made the obverse of the pastor's self-definition into the current affliction of the flock. At all stages, it peddled the pastor's offer as the flock's demand and thus explained the flock's need of a pastor. The hereditary culprit of Adam's sin needed the Church to earn forgiveness. The self-aggrandizing egoist needed the strong and exacting authority of the state to escape a life which was nasty, brutish, and short. The slave of instinct needed civilizing coercion to defend him from his folly and keep the inner beast in cage. Sinful, wicked or beastly, man needed a force stronger than himself to make up for the weaknesses he was impotent to repair. The weaknesses had been so designed that man could not repair them, but the superior force could. It was the way in which the weaknesses had been designed that made the force into a collective pastor, and men into a flock, and maintained the asymmetry of their respective positions.

The verdict of the moral ineptitude of man interfered with the

practical denial of the ethical value of man's moral impulse. Moral ineptitude stood for judgmental and behavioural dependency. Man's moral animus stood condemned for being an animus. For being an irksome and potentially subversive leftover of that autonomy which had to be theoretically delegitimized as it had been practically suppressed. Man's innate moral cathexis could not be squared with social powers. It could not be tolerated for being *innate*. In other words, it was not the substance of man's moral impulse, but its innateness, pre-sociality, which made it anti-social.

As is the case with all self-authenticating devices, the moral deficiency of man constitutes its own object; it constructs the world in the process of its reporting. When seen together with the practices it interprets, it reveals itself as a tautology. With the ethical authority vested firmly and indivisibly in the Church, the state, or society, whatever is born with and of man is devoid of moral value. It is held to be guilty until proven innocent. Whatever it does or may do, will be taken down and used as evidence of guilt.

### **Delegitimizing Moral Impulse**

Hardly any social thinker was more aware of the pastoral continuity between the sacred and the secular powers than Emile Durkheim. Hardly any did more than Durkheim to render this practical continuity theoretically palatable and pragmatically sustainable. If, warned Durkheim (1972: 110)

we confine ourselves to eliminating from moral discipline everything that is religious without replacing it, we almost inevitably run the danger of eliminating at the same time all elements that are properly moral . . . [W]e must discover the rational substitutes for those religious notions that have, for so long, served as the vehicle for the most essential moral ideas. (*L' éducation morale*)

The gap left by the vanishing act, or eviction, of the religious rule had to be filled, as 'man is a moral being only because he lives in society' (Durkheim, 1972: 93; *De la division du travail social*); every moral command 'entails at least an eventual sanction, and consequently a superior power to us, which is capable of constraining us' (Durkheim, 1972: 93; *La science positive de la morale en Allemagne*). The ends to which coercive collective sentiments oblige us to attach ourselves 'infinitely surpass the limited horizon which each of us possesses'; they 'do not derive from the inclinations of our individual nature, but tend rather to violate them'. No wonder

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that '[t]he voice which speaks to us in such an imperative tone, which enjoins us to change our own nature, can only derive from a being which is distinct from ourselves, and which also dominates us' (Durkheim, 1972: 133; *Deux lois de l'évolution pénale*).

And what would the alternative be? Nothing other than self-destruction (*L'éducation morale*). Which means, in practice, that no alternative exists. Which is what was to be demonstrated. But also what ought to be rejoiced in.

The individual submits to society and this submission is the condition of his liberation. For man freedom consists in deliverance from blind, unthinking physical forces; he achieves this by opposing against them the great and intelligent force of society, under whose protection he shelters. By putting himself under the wing of society, he makes himself also, to a certain extent, dependent upon it. But this is a liberating dependence. (Durkheim, 1972: 115; *Sociologie et philosophie*)

In this argument, some forces are blind and unthinking because they reside in the 'limited horizon' of man. Some other forces are intelligent because they are vouched for, and protected, by society. Society which defines itself as intelligent and man as unthinking by the same token proclaims superiority of itself, the intelligent force, over man, who is blind. It redefines man's vision as blindness, coercion as shelter, dependence as liberation.

Civilized society — Sigmund Freud (1973a: 46) reminds us — demands: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' But why should we do it?

[I]f he is a stranger to me and if he cannot attract me by any worth of his own or any significance that he may already have acquired for my emotional life, it will be hard for me to love him. . . . [H]e has more claim to my hostility and even my hatred. (Freud, 1973a: 47)

This explains why society must deploy all its awesome force to keep our aggressions in check. Its commandment, and the force with which it is executed, 'is really justified by the fact that nothing else runs so strongly counter to the original nature of man' (Freud, 1973a: 49). This is not the only explanation, though, as

there are two widespread human characteristics which are responsible for the fact that the regulations of civilization can only be maintained by a certain degree of coercion — namely, that men are not spontaneously fond of work and that arguments are of no avail against their passions. (Freud, 1973b: 4)

There are enough reasons 'that every civilization must be built up on coercion and renunciation of instinct' (Freud, 1973b: 3).

For Freud, unlike Durkheim, there is not much liberation in the act of surrender to the supreme force, and little to rejoice in. Man's acceptance of defeat is, rather, an act of barter, a trade-off: gained security is a recompense for lost freedom. Because of the unavoidable exchange, the gain is forever poisoned by the loss, and security often feels like an ordeal. The instinct has been renounced, but has not disappeared. The civilized man is a rebel. As he has not been conclusively tamed, he must stay in a cage. Civilized society is a cage, with commandments instead of bars. And yet there is no life outside the cage. Out there, there is only aggression, murderous passion and calculated greed.

Though Freud's drama is written in language starkly different from Durkheim's lyric poetry, both tell the same story: that of immorality of man and morality of society. Both contain the same lesson: man must be forced into moral conduct. Both reassert the right of society to tell the moral from the immoral, by representing this right as necessity arising from incurable frailty or turpitude of man.

This is not to say that Durkheim's or Freud's accounts (or, for this matter, our own shared scholarly folklore, which has absorbed them so deeply that it does not need to acknowledge the source any more) were false. They faithfully reflected reality as it was. Nowhere in society were moral judgements left to the discretion of man. Everywhere in society man's conduct was subject to external norms which separated the proper from improper, right from wrong, ethical from condemnable. What one may be tempted to question in the above accounts is not their descriptive, but their interpretational truthfulness: the placid and untroubled acceptance, so to speak, of the official version of the story. That version portrayed as the cause of the process was in fact its attained, or merely intended, outcome. It offered a causal explanation where a teleological one was called for. By suggesting that moral tutorship had to be exercised by society because without it man was immoral, it glossed over the fact that it was precisely the enforced segregation of moral authority from man's judgement that gave credibility to the verdict of man's ethical ineptitude and insufficiency. By the same token, it delegitimized and effectively removed from the agenda the enigma of innate moral impulse. For all practical

purposes, it rendered serious discussion of the latter all but impossible.

Let us repeat that non-social man is not to be found anywhere in time or space. For this reason, the hypothesis of inborn moral instinct cannot be investigated empirically. Less still can its truth ever be empirically demonstrated. The weight of available and imaginary evidence is massively on the side of moral monopoly and dictatorship of social agencies and ethical dependency of man. The question, however, whether the latter is itself inborn or pre-social, is as insoluble empirically as the issue of presence or absence of innate moral proclivity. Acceptance or rejection of both is a matter of interpretation, not of empirical proof. Although the mutually opposed assertions: (1) man's moral capacity is socially induced, and (2) man's moral incapacity is socially induced, appear in a quasi-empirical form, they elude empirical scrutiny because of the inconceivability of a non-social context which could supply the necessary controlling case. As there is no man outside society, the ethical incompetence of the social man, however unexceptional, neither proves nor disproves any of the suppositions about human 'natural' ethical endowment.

The prevalent doctrine of the social grounds and origins of morality does not possess the status of empirically testable theory. This doctrine can easily be deconstructed as a roundabout legitimation and a tool of self-assertion and self-reproduction of the selfsame reality it purports to account for (as, in other words, an assertion that promotes what ought to be the topic of explanation to the rank of an explanatory resource), yet such a deconstruction would not by itself discredit its descriptive credibility. The only way the doctrine can be questioned is to treat it as what it is, rather than what it claims or pretends to be: to see it as an *interpretation* of the text called social reality. An interpretation which has acquired a well-nigh universal currency (a circumstance itself inviting a thorough sociological enquiry), which nevertheless commands no more authority than interpretations in general are capable of commanding; and which can be comprehended only conjointly with the tacit premises of the discourse inside which it has been articulated.

Like all interpretations, the account under discussion can defend itself against critical scrutiny on condition that it (a) brings into the field of visibility aspects of reality which together justify their treatment as a totality self-sufficient for the purpose of explanation, and

(b) demonstrates coherence, comprehensiveness and logical consistency of explanations which can be produced within this field. The two conditions, of course, are anything but exclusive. After all, it is the way in which vision is focused (and thus selected aspects of the potential field are made invisible) that predetermines the possibility of advancing explanations satisfactory on all three counts.

It is a prominent attribute of interpretations (in sharp distinction to what the empirical proofs claim to be), however, that a successful defence of one interpretation does not preclude — either in principle or in practice — the possibility of a similar success of another, competitive interpretation. With all its power of persuasion, argumentative defence of one interpretation cannot conclusively invalidate another. The choice between competitive interpretations can legitimize itself only in reference to its grounds, being in the end itself an interpretation. Refusing to share the hubris of empirical proof, interpretation does not set itself outside the text reaching for its objectified and estranged account. Rather, it immerses itself in the text, trying to uncover its hidden possibilities, conscious of itself being one of those possibilities. However psychologically assertive, interpretation is therefore inevitably, even if unwittingly or reluctantly, tolerant and accommodating. It can ill afford that arrogant pretence of objectivity which barely disguises the never satisfied, yet never relenting bid for monopoly. Instead, it cannot but acknowledge 'the necessary relativity, subjectivity, and prejudice involved in any act of perception' (Handelman, 1982: 145). It is in order to escape just this admission that interpretations sometimes mask the truth of their metonymical relation with the text and attempt to pass themselves as metaphors: as replacements rather than displacements of the text, as reflections rather than extensions. It is only as an example of such false pretence that the interpretation of social reality in terms of an inborn immorality of man can deny its interpretative status and claim that of a scientific theory.

The rarely explicit, yet always invisibly present, presupposition of such interpretation is that only through fear, or through a calculated effort to avoid feared punishment, would man become a moral agent. If brought into focus and called to justify itself, this presupposition would point to the ubiquitous practices of social power, which indeed consist in deploying varied means of coercion, or threat of coercion, in pursuit of control over man's behaviour.

Thus Durkheim would invoke the external, unchallengeable *conscience collective* fortified with punitive sanctions: if they are not subjectively feared and actively avoided, it is only because their presence has not been yet revealed by breaching the rules they defend. Freud would recall the *superego*, that 'garrison in the conquered city', policing man's inclinations from inside, yet installed and armed by an external power. The theory of *morality* is thereby argued through the practices of *law*. It is the *legality* which is taken as constraint pure and simple; it is legality which has the proclaimed and enforced will of effective social powers as its sole origin and sufficient legitimation. 'Law is the authoritarian, alien determination of the will'; but 'morals are autonomous self-determination' (Bloch, 1986: 231). The argument tends to gloss over this distinction, to subsume morality under the practices of law. It thereby unwittingly grants the legislating powers fulfilment of their intention to subordinate the self-propelled to the heteronomous determination of conduct, to ban or disavow such self-determined will as may clash with extrinsically enforced rules. In other words, the theory of innate immorality of man is argued through the surreptitious replacement of ethics with law, through pre-empting in theory the pursued, though seldom if ever attained, target of social coercion: bringing most of the self-determined, autonomous determination in line with the heteronomous will, and suppressing or disfranchising the rest.

It is true that the assumption of innate immorality of man serves as the justification of this practice. Which does not necessarily make it correct. Even less convincingly does it disqualify its alternative. Indeed, the veracity of the empirical account will not suffer if the assumption is replaced with its opposite — that of the innate morality of man. Social practices of enforcement may be without contradiction interpreted as efforts aimed at the suppression, redeployment or manipulation of man's inborn tendency to moral conduct; at the suppression, in other words, of man's capacity to self-determination and behavioural autonomy. It is such an alternative interpretation which will be attempted here.

### **The Question of Innate Morality**

It has to be spelled out first what the concept of *innate morality*, or *natural ethical impulse*, postulates.

First, it contains the idea of *ethicality* in so far as it refers to the *concern with the Other*. Moreover, the concern it refers to has



nothing but the Other himself as its motive. This is a concern with the Other for the Other's benefit, as in Aristotle's description of friendship as 'wishing another's good for his sake, not for yours' (*Nichomachean Ethic*, 1974: 1166 A2-4), or Max Scheler's (1954: 37) account of commiseration: 'to be sorry at another person's sorrow, as being his'. The corollary of this condition is an imperative character of the concern in question, i.e. its independence from the qualities of the Other (and thus, by this definition, the friendship dictated, as Plato suggested in *Lysis*, by the usefulness of the object to the subject of affection, by the subject's hope that the befriended object will supply something which the subject lacks and misses,<sup>1</sup> does not fall into the category of moral phenomena). To be moral, concern with the Other must be simultaneously an *unconcern* with the subject's own comfort, pleasure or welfare. And it must not call on the Other to justify his right to concern. There is nothing the Other must do, or nothing in particular he should become, to trigger off the concern of the subject. In other words, concern is moral in so far as it is *disinterested*.

Second, the concept contains the idea of *innateness* in so far as the moral rule of concern is (as Brentano suggested) similar to the logical rule in one crucial respect: it is known at once, and with certainty. Being known at once means giving no occasion for argument and thus calling for no justification. What is known at once and with certainty is not a product of calculation, rational scrutiny or choice. On the contrary, it precedes the mental process which may lead to choice. Paradoxically, it is known at once by being unknown. It can be practised without compunction and hesitation as it has not been made conscious and subjected to the critical scrutiny of reason. It is practised not because it is good, seems sensible, or otherwise preferable to its alternative; in fact, not *because* of any considered reason. It is practised much like the flow of water which is downwards rather than upwards (unless forced by a pump or a dam), or the explosion of pressurized gas (unless contained by an equally powerful counterforce).

The assumption of innateness is therefore to be distinguished from the suggestions of the natural-law tradition, which imply, roughly, that 'the world is organized in a morally significant way, so human beings can learn what they ought to do by attending to the kinds of creatures they are' (Devine, 1978: 41). Objections like that raised by Richard Robinson (1962:xxiii) ('Once we have explicitly asked ourselves why we should do anything just because nature does

it, or why we should aid nature in her purposes, we see that there is no reason why we should. Let nature look to her own purposes, if she has any. *We* will look to *ours*'), which the natural-law tradition finds notoriously difficult to counter, leave the assumption of innateness unaffected. The latter, as it were, does not prompt the subject to 'ask himself why', can operate and does operate unpreceded by argument of any sort, and hence does not cast its effectiveness in balance by making it dependent on dubious hypotheses about 'nature's purposes' and the even more questionable injunction to derive one's *ought* from nature's *is*.

To conclude: to suppose that moral tendency is *innate* or *inborn*, means simply to imply that men tend to take a moral stance toward the Other in practice (c.f. Scheler, 1954: 130), unless forced otherwise. To imply, in other words, that the moral tendency, that is concern for the Other for the Other's sake, has the character of a pre-reflexive inner compulsion. It is also to imply that if not for extraneous forces (which include the learned and interiorized tendency to the rational calculation of gains and losses, the assessment of adequacy with an abstract rule, etc.), the self-determination of moral agents would invariably express itself in such a concern. It is to imply, finally, that if concern with the Other does not appear, or if its effectivity is defused and brought to naught, an operation of extraneous forces and the resulting heteronomy of the agent is to be supposed.

For Sartre, as for Heidegger, the entry of the Other into the self's world is not an event which happens after the self has been constituted as a conscious agent capable of inviting him and, indeed, of selecting the guests or granting the right of residence. Indeed, there is nothing the Other could enter, and thus no event of entry. The Other is always there, where the self is. The existence is always an *existence with* (Heidegger's *Mitsein*). Such pre-reflexive, irremediable, indisputable presence of the Other, the equivalence of that presence and the being itself can be visualized only by departing from the Cartesian *cogito*. The self does not 'postulate' the Other by projecting, extrapolating etc. the knowledge he already has about himself (by 'stretching himself' to reach the Other). The self comes into being *together* with the other, and knows of no other being but being with the Other. If *cogito* reveals the self to itself, it simultaneously uncovers the presence of the Other. The task cannot be split—if the Other is not immediately present to me, and if his

existence is not as sure as my own, all conjecture concerning him is entirely lacking in meaning' (Sartre, 1969: 251).

Moreover, the Other is immediately present as a *subject*. His subjectivity is not the self's imputation; much less is it the self's as-yet-untested hypothesis. It is his subjectivity that constitutes the Other and makes him the constituent of the self's being. The prime relation, the substance of 'being with', is 'being-seen-by-another'. Before the self finds himself in the presence of the Other, he is already seen by the Other. It is the feeling of being seen that awakes the self to 'being with', and at the very same moment to the Other as a subject. At no moment, however fleeting, does the Other appear as a mere object which might or might not be a subject. ' "Being-seen-by-the-Other" is the *truth* of "seeing-the-other" ' (Sartre, 1969: 251). But this subjectivity, in the form in which Sartre describes it, is an invitation to *objectification*. To look is to bring forth an asymmetrical relation. As a subject, the Other 'is the one who looks at me and at whom I am not yet looking' (Sartre, 1969: 257). He makes me into the object of his gaze before I have had the chance of constituting myself as a subject capable of making him my own object. First comes *shame*: 'the recognition of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging' (Sartre, 1969: 269). Shame, not the Cartesian doubt, lies in the heart of Sartre's *cogito*. Shame of being the self which another knows, shame of being an object for the Other, shame of losing mastery over situation, shame of one's own *possibility* reduced to another's *probability*. Becoming 'for-itself' is painful: the trauma it leaves in its wake prompts the urge to escape the shame through looking back, objectifying, reducing the Other's possibility to probability. It has been the objectifying procedure of the Other as a subject which gave birth to the subjectivity of the self. A self so conceived cannot but be animated by the compulsion to reciprocate by objectifying and reifying the Other. As every reader of Sartre knows, there is a straight road leading from *Being and Nothingness* to *In Camera*. The road that starts with *the original shame* ends in the agonizing discovery: The Hell is the Others.

Sartre's exploration of 'being with' has failed to reveal the existential foundations of morality. Indeed, concern with the Other as the source of the self's humiliation and anguish is not a promising start for the self's disinterested abandonment for the sake of the Other. A desperate though inconclusive and doomed strife is more

likely to follow. It will be prompted and agitated by desire of mastery and control, not by fellow-feeling or compassion. 'Being with' is a torment which yields at its best the self-knowledge of tormented existence.

The lesson flowing from Sartre's investigation seems to be conclusive. The grounds of ethics cannot be found in the self's *being*; neither can they be found in the self's *knowledge*. Sartre's failure to locate the birthplace of morality was already contained in his decision to explore the *ontology* of being, and the *cogito* as the being's primeval attribute.

It was left to Emmanuel Levinas to break through the quandary of the ever renewed and forever fruitless search for the ontological or rational foundations of ethics. He drew the conclusion elusive to others before him: 'morality comes not as a secondary layer' (Levinas, 1981: 10) It is secondary to nothing: neither to the being, nor to the knowledge of being. It resides before and outside them. It is this elementary given to which being and knowledge stand as ultimately failed attempts of escape. 'First philosophy', therefore, 'is an ethics' (Levinas, 1981: 13).

Morality is the secret of sociality, and yet neither existence nor knowledge give birth to morality. Both come *after*, and thus the philosopher's task is to trace sociality back to the *before*. Since being and knowledge have been disclosed as blind alleys, it is the outside, the 'otherwise than being' that must hold the mystery. 'The social is beyond ontology' (Levinas, 1982: 58). 'Sociality cannot have the same structure as knowledge' (Levinas, 1982: 60). Sociality is before being. Sociality is before knowing that being is.

### **The Primacy of Face-to-Face**

Indeed, one is *for* the Other before one has time to think of principles or norms, before looking and being looked at, before being for oneself, being with, being-in-the-world; before being. This is why ethics is and will remain a scandal for ontology. It will also remain a scandal for the rational powers of intellect.

In his first great book, *Existence and Existents* (1947), Levinas finds 'there is' a void, a hollowness, a featureless 'neither being nor nothingness'. Something akin to the eerie sound coming from an empty shell pressed to the ear; or to the indecipherable noise from behind the wall in a strange hotel room; or to insomnia, that intrusion of objective impossibility into being, that depersonalization of consciousness. Prising parts of 'there is' and making them into

*existents*, objects of possession, makes no breach in the bottomless infinity of 'there is'; nor does it detract from its meaninglessness. Instead, it fastens the self to the existents he dominates, and through them to the nonsense of 'there is'. It does not break the 'rumbling silence' of 'there is'. It does not offer solace for the horror and panic of the suspension between being and nothingness. At the end of the day, like through the day, everything remains as it was. If there is an escape from 'there is', it leads not through 'position', but through 'deposition' of the self. Only abdication of sovereignty in the face of the Other, responsibility for the Other, stops the meaningless, rumbling clamour of the 'there is'.

Being reduced to the 'is', being without the 'ought', means solitude. This was the theme of the companion book, *Time and the Other* (Levinas, 1987). Existence is intransitive, without intention and without meaning. It is mine and mine alone. Knowledge and communication cannot deliver the self from loneliness. One can *tell about* one's existence, but one cannot *share* it. 'Being with' does not relieve existential solitude. If 'being with' means exchanging and sharing, one can exchange and share everything but existence. Thus 'being with', like all other modes or facets of existence, cannot establish a moral relationship. It is 'being for' which does. In being, there is no way out from solitude. There is no solitude in morality.

The last of Levinas's books, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1981), concludes the search. Moral relationship is irreducible, it is not a derivative or artefact or effect of anything else. It is neither deducible from being nor provable in knowledge. It is grounded instead in a pre-ontological and pre-intellectual relationship which already contains the 'for': I being for the Other, I bearing responsibility for the Other. A 'for' which would not be inserted, by whatever effort, into it — were it not there from the start.

The responsibility for the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the other side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory', an 'ulterior to every accomplishment', from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. . . . It is as though the first movement of responsibility could not consist in awaiting nor even in welcoming the order (which would still be a quasi-activity), but consists in obeying this order before it is formulated. (Levinas, 1981: 10, 13)

Responsibility for the Other appears uninvited; it has been neither

planned nor accepted with resignation. It is there whether I know of it or not. It does not hang on my resolve to take it. Neither does it vanish with my refusal to bear it. 'I am responsible without having taken on responsibility.' I am responsible because of the *proximity* of the Other. Proximity means, indeed, my responsibility. Proximity pregnant with responsibility

in nowise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object — to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the Other is known to me. (Levinas, 1982: 10)

Proximity does not follow from anything else and has not been heaved into the face-to-face with a lever of realized coexistence or calculated commonality of interest. In fact, 'the tie with the Other is knotted only by responsibility'. No second bottom, no hidden cause. Particularly, no foundation. Responsibility is 'the essential, primary, and fundamental structure of subjectivity'. Ethics does not follow subjectivity: it is subjectivity that is ethical. In Levinas's (1982: 97, 95) description, ethics 'does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility'.

Levinas's audacious decision to disqualify existence and subjectivity as sources of morality, and to proceed to found morality outside the hunting grounds of both, and particularly his resolution to assign morality priority over being (since morality is prior, priority itself is ethical: the priority of morality means that morality is *better* than being, not that morality *precedes* being in time or is its *cause*) — constitute nothing less than a decisive break in philosophical tradition. In Levinas's own words,

[t]he proximity of one to the other is here conceived outside of ontological categories in which, in different ways, the notion of the *other* also figures, whether as an obstacle to freedom, intelligibility, or perfection, or as a term that confirms a finite being, mortal and uncertain of itself by recognizing it, or as a slave, collaborator or God able to succour. (Levinas, 1981: 16)

In all these categories, which between them exhaust the alternatives offered by the extant philosophical tradition, 'proximity is conceived ontologically', i.e. it 'remains a distance diminished, an exteriority conjured'. In opposition to this shared view, Levinas (1981: 16) 'sets out to not conceive proximity in function of being'.

Proximity, exposure to the Other, responsibility for the Other are all 'chosen without assuming the choice'; as such, they 'must have the meaning of a "goodness despite itself", a goodness always older than the choice' (Levinas, 1981: 56-7) (one invests that 'older', again, with ethical sense; 'older' means 'better' — ethical standards are before the choice has begun, and they are therefore superior, as measures, to all other criteria, like utility, rationality, agreement with the 'facts of the matter', by which the choice can evaluate itself).

Not the knowledge of the Other, not the shame of being looked at by him, not even my effort to reach him, to console him or placate, to disarm or overpower makes me that unique and irreplaceable being that I am — but the call of responsibility, pre-conscious obsession, trauma of command which is heard unspoken, which comes pure, bodiless, free of representation, demands submission without authority, consent without argument, duty without law. My uniqueness, my self-ness is grounded in my being called upon, and hence being someone no one else can replace. Responsibility is mine, I have been singled out, there is no one else to share my obsession or relieve its burden by taking it upon himself. And since my calling can be none else but mine, my responsibility bears no relief and bars all escape: 'The face of a neighbour signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract'

Humanity, to which proximity properly so called refers, must . . . not be first understood as consciousness. . . . Proximity does not resolve into the consciousness a being would have of another being that it would judge to be near inasmuch as the other would be under one's eyes or within one's reach, and inasmuch as it would be possible for one to take hold of that being, hold on to it or converse with it, in the reciprocity of handshakes, caresses, struggle, collaboration, commerce, conversation. Consciousness . . . would then have already lost proximity properly so called, now surveyed and thematized. (Levinas, 1981: 88, 83)<sup>2</sup>

Consciousness of the Other is already a break in proximity. When cognized, the Other turns into an object. My consciousness is my mastery over him and his impotence. My responsibility dissolves in his duty to apologize for his presence and argue his case. I am now asking questions. I am interrogating him and demand explanations: What is it to me? Or what is in it for me? Or where does he get his right to command? Or what have I done to be in debt to him? I demand legitimation for the command and some evidence of my

duty. I may accept the legitimation and consider the duty justified and proven. And yet the original proximity has been lost. There is now distance between us never to be bridged again. At worst a war, at best a contract and a compromise are now where my responsibility was. This is, however, not only *his* loss. That responsibility which had made me before the unique being that I was, the one and only, the irreplaceable, the indisposable and indispensable, is now gone. I have lost my obsession, I am free from that shuddering which overwhelmed me in the face-to-face with the Other, but I have also lost my uniqueness, my calling, my meaningfulness. Once more I am alone with the 'there is', that rumbling silence which can be neither quashed nor made to speak, that emptiness which will never be filled however earnestly — through mastery, possession or knowledge — I try.

Responsibility is *mine* in the strongest of conceivable senses: it 'forgets reciprocity, as in a love that does not expect to be shared'.

The knot of subjectivity consists in going to the other without concerning oneself with his movement toward me. Or, more exactly, it consists in approaching in such a way that, over and beyond all the reciprocal relations that do not fail to get set up between me and the neighbour, I have always taken one step more toward him — which is possible only if this step is responsibility. In the responsibility which we have for one another, I have always one response more to give, I have to answer for his very responsibility. (Levinas, 1981: 82, 84)

Responsibility is my affair, reciprocity is his. My responsibility is unexceptional and unconditional. The Other need not 'prove' anything to 'deserve' it. Neither do I bear my responsibility 'in order' to 'earn' his response in kind. There is no forethought, no anticipation of reward and no calculation of gain in my responsibility. I am responsible for the Other whatever the Other does, I am responsible *before* he does anything at all and *before* I am aware of his doing — indeed, of his very capacity of doing. And it is precisely the *otherness* of the Other which burdens me with responsibility. Recognition of community, rationalization of similarity or commonality of interest — all this, if it does come, comes later. I am responsible *before* my responsibility is justified or vindicated.

The neighbour concerns me before all assumption, all contract consented to or refused. . . . Here is a relation of kinship outside all biology, 'against all logic'. It is not because the neighbour would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely *other*. The community with him begins in my obligation to him. (Levinas, 1981: 87)<sup>3</sup>



Everything else begins after that obligation. Also the questioning of the obligation: the call for responsibility to show its *reasons*, for the Other to supply evidence of his *entitlement* to my concern. Once the questioning starts, proximity has already been replaced with a distance, and responsibility has lost its unconditionality; the obsession has been replaced by calculation. No effort will restore the pristine unexceptionality of my responsibility. All responsibility grounded in being (unlike the one rooted in the otherwise-than-being, in the face-to-face which is the creation, simultaneously, of my uniqueness, my humanity, and our community) will forever remain fragile, negotiable, until further notice, and ultimately, like the rest of the 'there is', meaningless.

Once the innocence of responsibility has been lost and a distance opens where once proximity was, questions may be and are asked.

Why does the other concern me? . . . Am I my brother's keeper? These questions have meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself. In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, would concern me. (Levinas, 1981: 117)

But how come that self-concern of the self has been supposed? How come this hypothesis carries credibility which allowed it to hide its hypothetical character so successfully? Unless we are prepared to say that it was simply the matter of philosophers' collective blindness or folly, that while 'writing footnotes to Plato' we have been, boldly yet hopelessly, smarting under the blow delivered by his false, yet so cogent argument — we can only suppose that self-concern is more than an illusion which can be dispersed by exposing the philosophers' blunder. We must suppose that in the cold climate of being proximity does wilt and crumble. It either dies out or, if resilient, is stored away in that huge warehouse of infamy named irrationality or mysticism (civilization, as Hans Peter Duerr (1985: 89) pointed out, equates the boundaries drawn 'between itself and the wilderness with a dividing line between reality and illusion'). In the constructed order of being nothing is tolerated unless it is able to show itself to be a construct. Something must have happened or be constantly happening to the groundless, reasonless obsession of proximity in the socially constructed world of human existence. Something fatal. Perhaps also irrevocable.

In our world, Levinas insists, proximity (this of the otherwise-than-being kind, not the one laboriously construed in a — fragile

because exclusive — love relationship, or imagined in the countless variants of group therapy) is not completely extinct. It cannot be; however few of its offshoots show themselves through the thick concrete of social order, the roots must be there somewhere beneath for any life to be sustainable on the top of the lifeless base.

It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity — even the little there is, even the simple 'After you, sir'. The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition of all solidarity. (Levinas, 1981: 117)

This may indeed be the case, yet the 'After you, sir' courtesy cannot but strike us as falling far short of the unconditional self-abandonment, that 'deposition of sovereignty', which the original proximity implied. In the strainer of social order little has remained of that inter-human responsibility, which is still allowed to retain spontaneity and to be followed without rhyme or reason; indeed, so little that it does not feel right to wonder over the blindness of philosophers. The strainer must have done its job well, as it is excruciatingly difficult to guess the noble origin of the humble leftovers one can see. This job holds the secret of the vanishing act of that ethics which preceded sociality as, simultaneously, its condition and its *better* alterity. It is the absence or paucity, not the presence or possibility, of morality in social life which is to be explored and explained if the secret is to be revealed. The tradition of the sociological analysis of morality must be, virtually, turned upside down. This is the practical lesson from Levinas's (1982: 80) argument:

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 consequences of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man?

What follows is an attempt to sketch the lines along which the answers to Levinas's (for all we know from his argument, purely rhetorical) questions may be fruitfully sought. An attempt to retrace the demise of proximity: first diachronically, through exploring the passage to such forms of common life as with every turn left less room to the face-to-face situations in which proximity grows; and then synchronically, through the investigation of aspects of social

cohabitation that favour distance over proximity and the contract over unconditional responsibility.

The attempt will proceed on the assumption that the 'innate moral depravity of man' may simply be a claim of society which has already established its right to refuse moral authority to everything it does not control. It is the way in which this right has been established and is continually sustained and reproduced that will be kept in the focus of attention.

### **The Alien Next Door**

Through most of human history, physical and moral proximity overlapped and so did physical distance and moral estrangement. For the self, the world of *biologically* human split into two sections kept strictly apart and rarely confused: that of neighbours and that of the aliens. The first wore a face, the others remained faceless. An alien who entered the radius of physical proximity was either an enemy to be fought and expelled, or an admittedly temporary guest to be confined to special quarters and surrounded by an isolating ritual, or a neighbour-to-be, in which case he had to be made like neighbour and acquire (or be given) a face.

Familiarity did not necessarily mean friendship. Neither had it to mean trust. Nor readiness for altruistic sacrifice. Nor sentiment of unity, mutual loyalty, brotherhood. Ideology which represented community as a unit held together by the *awareness* of unity, by a fraternal sentiment which made it family-like without making it a family, a territory of unqualified cooperation and mutual help — such an ideology came later, as a sure symptom of a neighbourhood fast losing its past distinctive quality, clear boundary, and hence also its grip on human attitudes and reciprocal relations. The reality of neighbourhood was more diversified than the latter-day ideology of community. It had room for love as much as for hostility, for solidarity as much as conflict. And yet neighbourhood stood out for the fact of carrying moral significance.

What distinguished the neighbour from the rest was that he had always been a potential partner of that face-to-face which cast him as unique and irreplaceable. The partners sustained each other's uniqueness. Their irreplaceability was each other's responsibility they could not renounce. Their relationship bore the mark of that responsibility: it was *particular*, aimed at the attributes which gave the partner his identity, and it was *diffuse*, spilling over and saturating the whole of the partner's identity whatever the ostensible

subject matter of the transaction. In the face-to-face, the identity of partners was established and reasserted by the exercise of responsibility. Neighbourhood was, inescapably, an ethical relationship. The neighbour was, inescapably, that silent voice which summoned and commanded responsibility. And within the radius of physical proximity, inside the field of vision and territory of daily intercourse, there were only neighbours. Almost completely, the life-world was a moral world. Societies which offered such a life-world could do without teachers of ethics. And without the police.

They could not do without the armies, though. Human coexistence stopped at the neighbourhood's boundary. On the other side of the boundary stretched wilderness: the impenetrable world occupied by faceless bodies. The bodies could cross the frontier, but the moral compulsion stayed at home and could not survive the crossing. Responsibility could reach only as far as the boundary of the neighbourhood; the boundary of responsibility *was* neighbourhood. There was no responsibility for the faceless. Only the face can trigger off ethical urges and press moral brakes. Societies which did not need police knew of no mercy, compassion, or fellow-feeling for the outsiders. In a world regulated by moral instinct, there is no regulation of human intercourse beyond the reach of ethics. Humans do not divide into neighbours and aliens. There are humans, and there are aliens.

A totally new situation emerges when the primordial co-ordination between physical and moral proximity is broken. Aliens appear inside the confines of the life-world and *refuse to go away* (though one can hope that they will in the end). They are not visitors, those stains of obscurity on the transparent surface of daily reality, which one can bear with hoping that they will be washed out tomorrow (though one can still be tempted to do this right away). They do not wear swords; nor do they seem to hide daggers in their cloaks (though one cannot be sure). They are not like the aliens one knows of. Or at least that is what they pretend. However, they are not like the neighbours either. True, one cannot avoid being aware of their presence, meeting them, coming across them, even talking to them or being talked to by them on occasion. But the encounters are too brief and casual to see each other's face, and there are too many of them for the faces, once seen, to be remembered.

They are neither neighbours nor aliens. Or, rather — confusingly, disturbingly, horrifyingly — they are both. Neighbourly aliens. Alien neighbours. In other words, *strangers*. That is: morally

distant yet physically close. The aliens within physical reach. Neighbours outside moral reach. Inhabitants of the ethically neutral, no man's land of moral indifference. Agents and objects of intercourse denied the safe foundation of responsibility, and hence doomed to remain forever unpredictable, shaky, uncertain.

One meets the neighbour at the other side of one's responsibility. One meets the alien (if at all) at the point of the sword. There is no clear rule about meeting the strangers. Intercourse with the strangers is always an incongruity. It stands for the incompatibility of the rules the confused status of the stranger invokes. It is best not to meet strangers at all. As one cannot really avoid the space they occupy or share, the next best solution is the meeting which is not quite meeting, a meeting pretending not to be one, a (to borrow Buber's term) *mismeeting* (*Vergegnung*, as distinct from meeting, *Begegnung*).

Living with strangers requires the art of mismeeting. The application of the art is necessary if the strangers, for their sheer number if not for any other reason, cannot be domesticated into neighbours. And it is the application of this art that constitutes the other as a stranger and reaffirms him in his capacity.

The art of mismeeting relegates the Other to the background; just a blot on the backcloth against which the action is set. The background is undeniably there. One knows that, were this his wish, he would be able to bring it into focus at any time. And yet one sees no reason to do so. The background bears no impact on the course and the results of action except for providing its physical setting. In the Schutzian process of *periodeusis*, that scanning of the world-within-reach which results in the assignment of *topical relevances*, the stranger is assigned none. His is an irrelevant presence, a non-recognized being, a non-admitted existence: a non-being being, an incongruity resonant with his own. By the technique of mismeeting, the stranger is allocated to the sphere of *disattention* (Goffman, 1971: 312),<sup>4</sup> the sphere with which all conscious contact, and above all a conduct which may be recognized by him as a conscious contact, is studiously avoided. This is the realm of moral void, inhospitable to either sympathy or hostility; an uncharted territory, stripped of signposts; a wild reserve inside the life-world. For this reason it must be ignored. Above all, it must be shown to be ignored in a way leaving no chance of misinterpretation.

The art of mismeeting is first and foremost a set of techniques of *de-ethicalizing* the relationship with the Other. Its overall effect is

a denial of the stranger as a moral object and a moral subject. Or, rather, exclusion of such situations as can accord the stranger moral significance. No wonder the most prominent among the techniques is the avoidance of eye contact. It is enough to note the amount of furtive glances each pedestrian needs to monitor the movements of the passers-by in order to avoid collisions, or the surreptitious visual gauging of the crowded office or waiting room one enters in order to locate an unobtrusive place for himself, to realize how complex are the skills this technique requires.<sup>5</sup> The point is, as it were, to see while pretending that one is not looking. To see, while neither inviting nor justifying reciprocity. To attend, while demonstrating disattention. What is required is a gaze masquerading as indifference. A reassuring gaze, informing that nothing will follow the perfunctory scrutiny and no mutual rights or duties are presumed.

But the summary effect of universal application of *civil indifference* is, as Helmuth Plessner (1974) has cogently shown, the *loss of face*;<sup>6</sup> or, perhaps, failure to acquire one. The urban crowd is not a collection of individuals. It is rather an indiscriminate, amorphic totality in which individuality dissolves. The crowd is faceless, but so are its units. Units are replaceable and disposable. Neither their entry nor their disappearance makes a difference. It is through their facelessness that the mobile units of urban congestion are silenced as the possible sources of moral command.

It is only by moral commands that the individual, composed as he is from the responsibility he carries, is singled out as an individual: the unique, the one and only, carrier of that obligation which he cannot shoulder off or cede. Their power to give moral command denied, the strangers are not individuals. It is my courtesy and good judgement which make me tolerate their presence. In doing so, I give tribute to my generosity, not their rights. I myself set the limits to which I would go. The limits may shift, there is nothing obligatory about them, the stuff in which boundaries are carved has no resilience of its own, no structure to which I must attend with the same care with which I examine my carving tools and calculate their carving powers. De-faced, the former or never-fully-formed individuals blend into the homogeneous compound in which my life is inserted. Like all other samples of this amalgam, they appear, in Simmel's (1969: 52) memorable phrase, 'in an evenly flat and grey tone; no one object deserves preference over any other'. If differing values of things, and hence the things themselves, are

noted, they 'are experienced as insubstantial'. All things, as it were, 'float with equal specific gravity . . . , lie on the same level and differ from one another only in the size of the area which they cover' (Simmel, 1969: 52).

Simmel insists that this maintenance of a distance at which all faces blur and turn into shapeless colour blots, this detachment always tinged with aversion and antipathy, is a natural defence against the dangers inherent in living among strangers. Repulsion and subdued hostility, controlled most of the time yet never fully lost and always ready to explode into hatred, make such living technically possible and psychologically bearable. They sustain the dissociation which is the only form of socialization under the circumstances: living next to each other (though not together). They are now the natural, and the only available means of self-defence.

The city is a *mismeeting* place. It is organized so that meetings which are not actively sought may be avoided or — if unavoidable — may remain inconsequential. Richard Sennett gave us a perceptive, thoughtful description of some of the foremost achievements of city architecture (Lever House in New York, Brunswick Centre in London, the Defence Office in Paris) as 'vast areas of empty space', areas 'to pass through, not to use', 'to move through, not to be in'. The spatial organization of the city as a whole, with its throughfares and urban motorways, underground trains and air-conditioned and tightly sealed cars, may be conceived of as a facility for making 'a journey from place A to place B' (Sennett, 1974: 12–14), for breaking the continuity between places, isolating homely spots from the wilderness in between. In addition, there is a pronounced tendency to spatial segregation of classes, ethnic groups, sometimes genders or generations — so that the techniques of *mismeeting* could be applied more concertedly and with greater trust in their effect (or in some cases suspended as irrelevant and thus offer a temporary relief from stultifying constraints of civil inattention).

In cases when the 'voluntary', that is trained and internalized, civil inattention cannot be relied upon (for instance in the early stages of urbanization, or following an influx of large numbers of poorly urbanized newcomers), the rules of mutual non-interference and habits of ostentatious indifference had to be enforced. Regular policing was an urban invention, and its original briefing was the defence of urban public space against intruders whose annoying curiosity deprived the others of the protection of anonymity.<sup>7</sup>

'Loitering' has been a typically urban offence — conceived as a punishable crime only because it clashed with the conception of the public space as an 'area to move through, not to be in'. In the process of development of the urban organization of space as a setting for mismeetings, and of the habits of civil inattention and moral indifference, the cause and effect reinforced each other to the point of becoming difficult to separate. In the end, one is unthinkable without the other.

Simmel considered money, that *Eigenschaftlos* abstraction of pure and neutral quantity devoid of all qualitative differentiation, as simultaneously the inescapable product, indispensable condition and a most illuminating metaphor of city life:

The significance of the stranger for the nature of money seems to me to be epitomized in miniature by the advice I once overheard: never have any financial dealings with two kinds of people — friends and enemies. In the first case, the indifferent objectivity of money transactions is in insurmountable conflict with the personal character of the relationship; in the other, the same condition provides a wide scope for hostile intentions which corresponds to the fact that our forms of law in a money economy are never precise enough to rule out wilful malice with certainty. The desirable party for financial transactions — in which, as it has been said quite correctly, business is business — is the person completely indifferent to us, engaged neither for us nor against us. (Simmel, 1978: 227)

Money transaction is, indeed, the foremost epitome of the urban-type intercourse. Its character must be defended not just against hostility and malice, but against friendship and sympathy as well. It thrives solely under conditions of moral neutrality; or, rather, under conditions totally free of moral considerations. The two polar categories into which the pre-modern human world was split, were equally ill-suited and inhospitable for money exchange. The proliferation of the money economy came together with the pushing aside and marginalizing of both sides of the once all-embracing dichotomy, and the filling of the vacated centre by the vast, infinitely expandable area of non-moral relationships. The intercourse which takes place inside this area cannot be executed in morally significant face-to-face situations. It needs partners as faceless as the monetary signs, guided in their expected and actual behaviour solely by the shared consideration of quantity, rather than by the inevitably unique, subject-bound qualitative values. Cut free from its anchor in another person, responsibility can now be attached to the impersonal rules of the transaction itself. On the way, it does not



become immoral: it only sheds its moral load. The substitution for moral proximity is not selfishness and immoral cruelty, only moral indifference. The Other does not become an enemy; he only loses his ethically commanding humanity.

One can summarize the process of modernization as one of the growing separation between reason and morality. The bulk of human intercourse has been detached from that area of face-to-face where it was bound to feel the impact of moral impulse (the separation of business from the family household is the best known — for some, even the crucial — manifestation of this tendency; business transactions need a morally neutral space which the face-to-face of the family life cannot provide). In most of their life-supporting actions, the actors are faceless and interact with equally faceless others. Modern society is a setting in which an orderly conduct of life is possible without recourse to the innate human capacity of moral regulation. Contrary to the most influential sociological doctrine, the major achievement of modern society has not been an imposition of moral order, but the liberation of the social order from moral significance, and of the forms of human interaction from moral constraints. By the same token a previously unthinkable, vast area of new technological possibilities has been thrown wide open.

The intimate connection between the neutralization of moral constraint and the growing rationality of human action has been well researched. It has also been well advertised, as the most seminal among the many accomplishments of modernity responsible for the unprecedented growth of human creative potential.<sup>8</sup> Much less has been heard about another consequence of this neutralization of moral impulse; namely, of the unprecedented malleability of human intercourse. The patterns of human action have become pliable to a degree never witnessed before. They may now be subjected to rules dictated in principle by any purpose, without fear of ethically inspired resistance. The actors may be induced to act without pondering actual or potential moral consequences of their actions. Once separated from the face-to-face setting and liberated from constraining moral impulses, human actions can be moulded in ways otherwise unthinkable.

Cut off from the original moral habitat, the norms of human action can be, and are, subordinated to other than ethical criteria, and evaluated by non-ethical standards. With the suppression or marginalization of such ethical relationships as only moral impulse

may generate, the socially enforced law may usurp the supreme, and to a large extent uncontested, regulatory function. The very idea of the ethical has been transformed to suit the situation dominated by the rule of law. Both in lay consciousness and in its academic rendering morality is represented in the image and likeness of the legal system; as in Durkheim, its extraneous origin is postulated, while the externally administered punitive sanctions are singled out as its paramount distinctive feature. The 'inner moral voice', on the other hand, cannot be conceived of but as a long reverberating echo of lawlike command. Having effectively extinguished competitive regulatory forces, the coercion-administering social powers may justifiably represent themselves as the only weapon mankind has left to defend itself against savagery.

### **Living Without Face**

This effect, as we have seen, has been achieved by *effacing the face*, rendering the Other *faceless*, and thus abolishing the Other as the source and the natural object of responsibility. The operation is indivisible and its effects cut both ways: the self is now free from moral responsibility for the Other, but he also cannot draw his security from anticipated moral responsibility of others. New freedom comes together with new vulnerability — power with defencelessness. For their safety, men and women depend fully on the overwhelming might of societal agencies. They truly need such a power. They, so to speak, crave to be dominated. Durkheim's eulogy of societal coercion rings true: surrender to that coercion becomes indeed a 'liberating experience', though for reasons rather different from those Durkheim suggested. This is, in the last account, the empirical grounding of credibility of the twin suppositions of the 'inner depravity of man' and of the societally administered coercion as the condition of humanity.

Despite their quasi-transcendental rendering, the two suppositions refer in the end to social practices and their effects. In particular, they refer to the practice of a society in which such human actions as are still ruled by ethical compulsion have been relegated to the margins or out of bounds of societal interest — while actions central to systemic reproduction and societal concerns are subject to the coercive impact of abstract and heteronomous legal rules. This practice is more likely an effect, rather than the cause of the 'facelessness'. The practice is logically inconceivable without prior disruption of moral proximity. On the other hand, however, the

practice has an evident self-propelling and self-accelerating potential. It recreates and reinforces the conditions of its own possibility. It comes uncannily close to the ideal of a *perpetuum mobile*. It reminds one of the legendary knife that sharpens itself while in use. It fertilizes, so to speak, the very soil which fosters its exuberant growth.

Three aspects of this modern practice deserve to be singled out as most fully embodying the self-perpetuating quality of modern social organization:

First, the development of technology which allows action at a distance — i.e. an action in which the causal connections between the acts which trigger it off and their ultimate effects remain invisible to the actor and at best apprehensible only theoretically. The 'distance technology' has eliminated face-to-face contact between the actors and the objects of their actions, and with that neutralized its morally constraining impact.

Second, the development of social organization (often dubbed as 'bureaucratic', in tribute to Max Weber's most comprehensive analysis of rational, i.e. efficient, and cost-effective action) based on a horizontal split of action into specialized and partial functions, and vertical gradation of competence and entitlements to decision making. The combined effect of both divisions is the placement of most actors in the situation of *intermediate men* (Lachs, 1981: 12) and keeping them for the duration of their actions in an *agentic state* (Milgram, 1974: 133) — with the *flotation of responsibility* as inevitable consequence (I have discussed this complex of issues at length elsewhere (Bauman, 1989)). Another result is the substitution of *legal predictability* for the moral one (Erasmus, 1974: 74, 87) and the demotion of the latter among the mechanisms of maintenance and reproduction of social order.

Third, the development of instrumental rationality which delegitimizes intrinsic value of action and consequently its moral evaluation. Judgmental monopoly of instrumental rationality is particularly radical in the new territory of distant-effect actions, where it encounters no competition from ethical criteria; or in the areas successfully prised off from ethical influence by institutional separation (i.e. segregation of business enterprise or state bureaucracy from family household and kinship network). From the centres of its unchallenged domination, instrumental rationality extends however its securely grounded authority to colonize the space of face-to-face intercourse, thereby displacing morality from

its once natural habitat (this bid is reflected in the efforts of modern ethical theory to establish rational foundations of morality, as well as in reductionist interpretations of ethical phenomena; for instance, in the most recent attempt by Luhmann (1986: 15–17) to anchor love functionally in the self-identity pursuits of structurally displaced members of modern society). Some authors, Helmuth Plessner among them, charge modern science (because of its endorsement and zealous mimicry of instrumental–rational rules of conduct) with complicity in the relentless process of eroding moral authority of human uniqueness; the natural tendency of science to generalized abstraction, to the disassembling of human individuality into a grid of general factors and causal connections, leads in Plessner's opinion to an 'objectivization' of man, that is to his transformation into a 'specimen' or 'case' devoid of intrinsic uniqueness and therefore incapable of carrying moral value. More credibly, Weizenbaum insists on the conflation of the institutional settings of instrumental–rational action and their theoretical reflection (and legitimation) in science in the production of effects possible only thanks to their freedom from moral evaluation:

Instrumental reason converts each dilemma, however genuine, into a mere paradox that can then be unraveled by the application of logic, by calculation. All conflicting interests are replaced by the interests of technique alone. . . . It is, in fact, entirely reasonable, if 'reason' means instrumental reason, to apply American military force, B-52's, napalm, and all the rest, to 'communist-dominated' Vietnam (clearly an 'undesirable object'), as the 'operator' to transform it into a 'desirable object'. . . . People, things, events are 'programmed', one speaks of 'inputs' and 'outputs' of feedback loops, variables, parameters, and so on, until eventually all contact with concrete situations is abstracted away. Then only graphs, data sets, printouts are left. And only 'we', the experts, can understand them. . . . (Weizenbaum, 1976: 251–3)

As far as the need of legitimation is concerned, instrumental–rational action is autarchic; it generates its own justification. No one exposed this remarkable quality with more poignancy than Jacques Ellul in his analysis of the self-propagating capacity of technology. Once the exemption from moral authority has been obtained and institutionally secured, once the situation has been reached that 'man in our society has no intellectual, moral, or spiritual reference point for judging and criticising technology', mostly because a closed circle has been created so that 'nothing can have an intrinsic sense; it is given meaning only by technological application' — technology does not need any more a legitimation to

keep it on course. Technology, Ellul insists, does not need legitimization any more; or, rather, it becomes its own legitimization. The very availability of usable yet underemployed technological resources justifies their need and calls for their application; resources of instrumental-rational action, so to speak, sufficiently legitimize their consequences and thus make their use imperative — whatever the results.

Technology never advances towards anything but *because* it is pushed from behind. The technician does not know why he is working, and generally he does not much care. He works *because* he has instruments allowing him to perform a certain task, to succeed in a new operation. . . . There is no call towards a goal; there is constraint by an engine placed in the back and not tolerating any halt for the machine. . . . The interdependence of technological elements makes possible a very large number of 'solutions' for which there are no problems. . . . Given that we can fly to the moon, what can we do *on it* and *with it*? . . . When technicians came to a certain degree of technicity in radio, fuels, metals, electronics, cybernetics etc., all these things combined and made it obvious that we could fly into the cosmos, etc. It was done because it could be done. That is all. (Ellul, 1980: 272-3, 280)

It is this self-accelerating yet purposeless tendency of organized action propelled by technology and liberated from control by moral impulse, which made Hans Jonas worry about the potentially apocalyptic outcome of what he calls the 'unintended dynamics' of modern civilization. A civilization moved solely by a technological 'engine in the back' is unlikely ever to stop of its own will. In the absence of inbuilt brakes, the consequences of blind and compulsive action tend to become *cumulative*; the final outcome eludes all sober a fortiori evaluation. '[T]he danger of disaster attending to the Baconian ideal of power over nature through scientific technology arises not so much from any shortcomings of its performance as from the magnitude of its success' (Jonas, 1984: 140, 202). Far ahead an ecological disaster is looming (more threatening perhaps than the use of the nuclear bomb which, after all, may be staved off by the sheer fact of being subject, at least potentially, to rational decision making). If it comes, it will — in Jonas's view — bear testimony not so much to human ineptitude or lack of industry, as to the astounding power of human imagination, daring and technical cunning.

## Conclusions

I tried earlier to explore the possibility of an inherently consistent

sociological theory of morality alternative to the dominant sociological doctrine; of a theory which starts off from the assumption of 'innate moral impulse' rather than, as in the dominant doctrine, of the 'innate moral depravity' of man. The major outline of such an alternative theory may be summarized in the following way:

1. With responsibility for the Other operative as an ethical force only under conditions of proximity, the sector of human intercourse it can regulate has consistently shrunk by comparison with the expanding and diversifying volume of symmetrical and asymmetrical dependencies which life in a complex society entails. In the totality of life-business, relations guided and ruled by moral impulse have been progressively marginalized and thus rendered inadequate for the societal and systemic functions.

2. As a result, a vast area of human intercourse has emerged which is exempt from moral regulation and to all practical intents and purposes is 'morally neutral'. Interaction within this sphere is guided instead by the rule of evasion ('mismatching', 'civil inattention'), or in the case of its insufficiency or impracticality, by the coercion-supported law.

3. The moral neutralization of the bulk of human conduct had two consequences of sharply different degrees of attractiveness: (a) On one hand, it was experienced as an exhilarating act of emancipation from vexing constraints imposed by personalized obligations; the sphere of morally neutral intercourse felt like the realm of freedom, choice and unbound creativity; (b) On the other hand, the rapidly expanding sphere of 'non-moral' behaviour supplied social powers with an unprecedented chance of initiating and administering societal action on a grand scale, as it made their commands unchallenged and unchallengeable. The overall result was the tremendous expansion of 'human potential' normally associated with the process of modernization.

4. However, when pushed to their extremes, the two consequences reveal worrying and potentially disastrous tendencies: (a) Men are easily induced to contribute to collective and co-ordinated endeavours the outcomes of which they would find repulsive and unbearable in the contexts of morally significant relationships; (b) Societal processes acquire growing autonomy from increasingly instrumental decisions of any institutionalized power and — having been guided solely by the self-accelerating technical potential of action — may easily get out of control and lead to results no one

anticipates or desires. The overall result is the constant and inbuilt danger of genocidal excesses or self-destruction.

5. Far from 'moralizing' human life, modern society has failed abominably to replace the moral impulse which the process of modernization defused and marginalized. While the macrosocial consequences of individual action have been removed to a safe distance from the microcontext in which moral injunctions may be effective, no substitute has been found which on a global scale could replicate the constraining influence exercised by moral impulse in the interpersonal sphere.

A new ethics (both in the sense of a doctrine and as a set of effective behavioural norms), fit to regulate actions which are conducted outside the morally dense context of proximity and which have distant and difficult to visualize effects, is still wanting. The 'moralization of politics', attainable through the dismantling of the most awesome monopolies of coercive power and through democratic control over the rest of the socially available resources of action, seems to contain some possibility of generating such an ethic. Social-scientific doctrine which endorses the separation of politics from morality by lending its authority to the assumption of the moral depravity of man and thereby replacing the issue of moral substance with that of the legal form does not exactly help in offering this possibility a trial.

## Notes

1. Compare with Price (1989: 2). Gregory Vlastos (1981: 30-1), whose work inspired Price's analysis, sums up Plato as a champion of 'spiritualized egocentrism'. According to his reading of Plato's discourse of friendship and love, Plato is 'scarcely aware of kindness, tenderness, compassion, concern for the freedom, respect for the integrity of the beloved'.

2. In Jacques Derrida's brilliant summary, '[b]eneath solidarity, beneath companionship, before *Mitsein*, which would be only a derivative and modified form of the originary relation with the other, Levinas already aims for the face-to-face, encounter with the face. "Face-to-face without intermediary" and without "communion" . . .'. The 'being together' in Levinas's sense, Derrida concludes, 'precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community'. But it is such a being together only in so far as it does precede or exceed society or any structured communion. 'The visage is a face only in the face-to-face.' For this reason, the other of the face-to-face is alone in being able to order 'thou shalt not kill' — 'and thus absolutely limits my power' (Derrida, 1978: 90-104).

3. One may note a more than contingent similarity between this radical altruism of Levinas's ethic and the unilateral responsibility for the 'dialogical' relationship between I and Thou in Martin Buber (1958). A dialogue, for Buber, is however

something to be established and sustained, which may not come to pass at all, which peters out in monologue unless made into a focus of concern and effort. Community between I and Thou, for Buber, originates in dialogue; it stands and falls by the quality of the dialogue, it has to be called into being and sustained; it may be withdrawn from (compare, for instance, the profound study of Buber's concept in Maurice Friedman (1982)). For Levinas, on the other hand, community precedes the dialogue and conditions its very possibility. In the dialogue, proximity of the face-to-face has already been compromised.

4. Being included in such a sphere, according to Goffman, means to require only the *civil inattention* and to respond with a similar 'courtesy'.

The forms of civil inattention, of persons circumspectly treating one another with polite and glancing concern while each goes about his own separate business, may be maintained, but behind these normal appearances individuals can come to be at the ready, poised to flee or to fight back if necessary.

As long as it is maintained, civil inattention sustains 'the surface character of public order' (Goffman, 1971: 331-2).

5. The techniques of avoidance necessary for life in a city ('stranger among the strangers') have found a thorough ethnographic description and a strikingly convincing analysis in Lyn H. Lofland (1973). According to Lofland (1973: 178) the key to urban survival is the 'capacity for the surface, fleeting, restricted relationship'; this is the task the techniques of disattention, in common with other specifically urban skills, serve.

6. Plessner (1974) suggests that loss of face inevitably follows that looking at each other 'at a distance', which contemporary world cannot do without, regardless of the price of de-individualization it must pay.

7. The instruction given to the police force freshly set up in Derby in 1835, and spelling out the main reason of instituting a professional order-protecting force, offers a good illustration: 'Persons standing or loitering on the footway without sufficient cause, so as to prevent the free passage on such a footway . . . may be apprehended and taken before a magistrate' (Quoted in Delves, 1981: 95).

8. Let us note that the impression of causal connection is due mostly to the tautological nature of the statement: moral indifference enters the definition of rationality, while moral considerations have been defined by modernity as irrational. Moreover, modernity defined its own identity through construing its opposition as, above all, irrationality: as a setting dominated by 'other than rational', e.g. traditional, affective or ethical factors.

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