

CONCLUSION

For a “good enough” justice

Through the preceding Chapters I have searched for a way in which to think with Levinas, but also “after” Levinas. My attempt has consisted of a series of exercises by which, next to the central theses of his thought, detailed exegesis of marginal aspects of Levinas’ work and explorations of inherent tensions in his work have been combined and subsequently submitted to amplification in confrontation with authors from the Weberian tradition, in order to gain a passage to a refigured conception of political responsibility for a globalised world.

The trajectory was launched by an insistence on the primordial political nature of the responsibility presented and advocated in the thought of Levinas. Responsibility is not only the name for ethicity, but it is at the same time a wisdom that is “urgent” and that by its very nature seeks its realisation in the fragile existence of people that are all too often exposed to different sorts of violence. Responsibility is political, because it is concerned with the fate of the *plurality* of others and the responsible agent always has to coordinate and prioritise the relative urgency of the others’ respective contemporaneously valid appeals to that agent’s responsibility. This political dimension is proper to all responsibility, whether practised in the framework of the social sphere of politics or not. In fact, political responsibility is called for in all domains of human interaction and also on the scale of all human interaction. This holds from the local to the global scale of all matters that would solicit or complicate the execution of responsible action; the ultimate horizon for reflection on political responsibility is the global scale of humanity, with the intricate relations of States and other global role players, of cultural and interest groups. Reflection on the history of colonisation and decolonisation throws this horizon of responsible action into relief.

The perspective from which Levinas' response to these challenges to responsibility has been presented is that of a humanism of which the root is not an essence of the human being, but the ethical obligation imposed by the other. This theme finds expression in certain writings prepared for a Jewish setting and where it furthermore resonates in a Jewish cultural politics by which Levinas reinterprets Jewish particularism in order to give it a new pertinence for the socio-political and intellectual situation of the Diaspora Judaism in France. The humanism of the other is given full philosophical expression in the book in which the major concerns of Levinas' work – the decisive origin and sense of all meaning in the context-independent ethical imperative imposed by the other on the self – are gradually developed in the form of thinking of his later period.

It is particularly the political implications of this thought of Levinas that is critically examined. Whereas the good intention and seriousness with which Levinas confronts the issue of responsibility cannot be questioned, it seems that there are possible unexpected and undesirable side-effects that could be engendered by his radical and limitless understanding of responsibility. More important than this probably marginal (but even so, serious) slide, is that the difficulty that Levinas' ethics has in dealing with the profound contradiction between the appeals of the plurality of others, with the unlimitability of responsibility and with reflecting upon the competence and means appropriate for responsible (in other words political) action within a particular historical context are exposed.

When these aspects of the political implications of Levinas' theory of responsibility are carefully studied, the marked difference between responsibility considered on the level of ethnicity and responsibility considered on the level of its political enactment becomes clear. It is the wager of the third Part of this book that the range of political implications of responsibility should be *developed* and submitted to further reflection. This has been prepared by identifying Levinas' double "polytheism", consisting, first, of the impossibility of finding an ultimate arbitration between the conflicting claims of different cultural (and other) perspectives (for which he proposes ethics as unifying meaning) and, second, of the annoying fact that the political agent is always confronted by a multitude of conflicting and incommensurable claims to his/her responsibility from the side of the others, which has to be arbitrated in a world where the agent of such arbitration will constantly be in conflict with other similar agents regarding the best arbitration. Once this is recognised, Levinas' notion of responsibility turns out to be much closer to Weber's than one would believe when considering only the first philosophy of the ethical meaning of the single

other. In fact, by amplifying the political implications with the aid of Weber, one can identify the importance of thinking about the consequences of action embarked on in responsibility. The consequences of action and the means adopted to realise justice contribute to the meaning of the ethical.

By analogy with Apel's recognition that even a deontological theory inevitably has to incorporate reflection on the consequences of responsibility, a four-fold programme for subsequent reflection on political responsibility has been outlined, consisting (at least) of elaborations (1) on strategy and sacrifice, (2) on forms and dimensions of responsibility and co-responsibility, (3) on the context and means of responsible action and, finally, (4) on the confrontation of responsibility with its limits in equity and the question of the exception. These four elements have been clarified with the help of Ricoeur, represented from the perspective of his appropriation and reinterpretation of Weber's ethic of responsibility. The complex constitution of practical wisdom in Ricoeur's ethico-political thought shows itself to be suitable to elaborate the intricate web of considerations that has to be held in tension when thinking about political responsibility. Whereas this trajectory suffices to indicate how I think responsibility in its political dimension can be thought after Levinas, a full development of such a theory of responsibility will have to be the project for another book.

My critic will not have failed to notice that, with respect to the difficult, unconditional and self-sacrificing justice of Levinas' ethics, the way forward that I propose for reflection on political responsibility entails a certain abatement. And since this abatement is associated with the effort to think realistically about the insertion of responsibility as ethicity in the world of its practical effectuation, one might be tempted to attribute an extreme cynicism to this project. But is the darkest cynicism not rather to be found in Levinas that condemns the entire tendency of politics, in fact, of Being itself, as a flux of violence? Is it not perhaps facile to criticise my moderation with respect to Levinas' position when the latter advocates the unconditionality of demanding responsibility against a pitch dark night of violence? Whereas I see no reason to adopt a rosy view of politics and its potential, the absolute denigration of human history makes the appeal to eschatology – that, after all has to be mediated, realised, by people – possible and thus the negative effects of the recourse to ultimate means can be written off against the account of the all-pervasive evil ontology. If, on the contrary, one wants to maintain the seriousness of responsibility, but at the same time remain vigilant with respect to the recourse to ultimate means and heroism, one does a favour to the concerns of Levinas to pull them into a Weberian sphere of

thought, in as far as this means integrating considerations regarding the means and consequences of responsible action, as they can be identified for a specific moment in history, into the very meaning and understanding of what responsibility is.

I could state my position somewhat differently. It is not my intention to evacuate the radicality attributed by Levinas to responsibility, but to accompany that radicality reflectively as far as possible, since that radicality cannot be assumed to be an *a priori* good when put to political action. It would be a caricature to suppose that such a reflective accompaniment would entail taming responsibility by a programme that would remedy the fallibility of ethical agents. Rather, it should be recognised that the fallibility of responsible agents and the complexity of the world in which they have to act, submit them to an unfortunate degree of incompetence. The human condition of responsibility is one of meagre moral luck. That is why the reflective accompaniment of responsible action will always be something of what Marquard called the competence to compensate for incompetence. This compensation for our moral un-luck means, in a world where it cannot be assumed that action out of good intentions will lead to desirable consequences, that one does better to recognise that there is an interval between the ethical constitution of the agent of responsibility and the exceptional, tragic and totally self-sacrificial exercise of that responsibility. If it can be conceded that there are situations that do call for the ultimate self-sacrifice, it seems nonetheless ill-advised to construe all forms of responsibility as derivatives of that exceptional manifestation of responsibility. Rather, prudent responsibility requires adaptation of the demands and forms of responsibility in correspondence with the degree of instability of the context in which responsible action has to be deployed. Equity is the figure under which different degrees of questionability of a state of justice can be challenged, in a way appropriate to that situation.

But is it not true, then, that there might be situations that are so exceptional and where the social institutions of responsibility are destabilised to such a degree, that it is incumbent on the individual agent of responsibility – despite his/her lack of skill or insight into the situation – to take whatever measures available to oppose a state of injustice? As hard as my criticism of the possible fanatical slide in a Levinasian ethics might be, I cannot see how the possibility of such “states of exception” can be ignored. Both Apel and Ricoeur have been indicated to affirm as much. This is also the central problem in Arendt’s troubled reflections on personal responsibility.¹ It is for this reason

1 See Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*. Jerome Kohn (ed.). New York: Schocken Books, 2003. Considering the case of Nazi Germany, Arendt is con-

that I have described the dramatic self-sacrifice towards which the Levinasian political agent may head as *ambiguous*: political saints are not only known throughout history for having sown chaos and destruction through their fanatical pursuit of justice; other saints have also faced the most adverse circumstances in the most praiseworthy manner – for other people and at the expense of their own lives. This ambiguity seems to me possible to recognise only if one doesn't abandon Being as such to pitch-black evil, but sees it in its shades of grey, as it were, and thus realises that the intensity of action that drives the two extreme possibilities of this ambiguity apart, is only gradually arrived at as the call for responsibility approaches regions of increasingly complex, troubled and unstable action, and where the call for equity gives increasing credibility to considering the exception reasonable.

Yet, there is no neutral vantage point from which to judge the gravity of exception of historical situations. Because of this fact, the fragility² of responsible agency is amplified by the obscurity of what could be called evil; calling the exception is ultimately a manifestation of the inscrutability of the ultimate ground for the choice between good and evil.³ This fact is exacerbated by the tragedy that evil can masquerade as the ultimate good, for instance the ultimate good of the exception that, under extreme cases, one cannot simply refuse. For this reason one might ask if it is not better to adopt a stance towards the exception and equity that

vinced that “there exist extreme situations in which responsibility for the world, which is primarily political, cannot be assumed because political responsibility always presupposes at least a minimum of political power.” (p. 45). Hence, assuming personal responsibility under conditions in which all customary rules have broken down (pp. 26–27) means two things. First, it entails responding to the negative counsel of the conscience that prohibits one as an individual from engaging in certain activities if one wants to be able to live with oneself henceforth (p. 44) – this powerless refusal to collaborate or consent being the trait of moral, rather than political action. Second, under the “marginal situation in which moral propositions become absolutely valid in the realm of politics is impotence” (p. 156), and judgement, for Arendt, functions without any pre-established procedure. But even here, one does well to compare Arendt's notes on “Civil disobedience” (in *Crises of the Republic*. San Diego, et al.: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1969, pp. 51–102), which is a neat argument for justice as equity, in other words for calling the law to greater justice in the name of the spirit of the law. Civil disobedience is thus already a fairly radical questioning of a state of justice, but not so severe that one could say that the actors of civil disobedience act out of absolute powerlessness and personal responsibility and thus completely apolitically.

2 Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “Fragilité et responsabilité”, in *Eros and Eris. Contributions to a hermeneutical phenomenology*. Paul van Toegeren et al. (eds.). Dordrecht, et al.: Kluwer, 1992, pp. 295–304.

3 I take the formulation of this phrase from Richard Bernstein's *Radical evil. A philosophical interrogation*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002, p. 235.

might be called that of a *good enough* justice, in a way comparable to what Winnicott calls a “good enough” mother. This is not an attempt to tackle political matters with tools from family psychology, but simply to adopt the idea of “good enough” as opposed to “perfect”. The good enough mother doesn’t do everything by the book as the perfect mother does (and the latter consequently risks suffocating her child by her care). “Good enough” is a figure of real and constant, demanding devotion, but where the relationships in which one is involved and the historical development thereof are given due recognition. The perfect justice might be the cleanest in theory, but can be quite messy in practice; a good enough justice accepts compromise to various degrees in common circumstances and while it doesn’t exclude the dramatic exception, it doesn’t live constantly under the pressure of tragedy. It is true that “good enough” would be a hermeneutical concept and it might be that finally it says not much more than prudence. Therefore, in order to have the advantages of prudence, of a serious devotion to practice that is nonetheless not insensitive to contingent circumstances, such prudence has to be given its proper place in ethical reflection. That is why it should be included in a thorough theory of responsibility.