

SELECTION

The present selection “Useless Suffering,” considers, in Levinas’s understated way, the problem of theodicy—defending God and His justice in a world in which there is evil—after Auschwitz. For Levinas, the effort to defend God’s justice is made impossible by the murder of European Jewry, during which he lost most of his close family who still lived in Kovno, Lithuania, when the Nazis arrived. Instead, Levinas would have us understand Auschwitz and the Holocaust as paradigms of the universal problem of evil—he explicitly refers to other events of mass death such as the Gulag and “the genocide of Cambodia”—that demand an ethical rather than a theological response in which causing or allowing the suffering of the Other becomes unpardonable. Levinas’s essential argument is this: If we each cared, as we should, for the Other, there would have been no Holocaust, no Cambodia, and no Rwanda. This obligation, rather than metaphysical efforts to justify the Divine, is the real need of the present hour.

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USELESS SUFFERING

Theodicy

“He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow,” says Ecclesiastes (1:18), where suffering appears at the very least as the price of reason and of spiritual refinement. It would also temper the individual’s character. It would be necessary to the teleology of community life, where social unrest awakens a useful attention to the health of the collective body. The social utility of suffering is necessary to the pedagogic function of Power in

education, discipline, and repression. Is not fear of punishment the beginning of wisdom? Is it not believed that sufferings, submitted to as sanctions, regenerate the enemies of society and man? This political teleology is founded, to be sure, on the value of existence, on the perseverance of society and the individual in being, on their successful health as the supreme and ultimate end.

But the unpleasant and gratuitous nonsense of pain already pierces beneath the reasonable forms which the social “uses” of suffering assume.

These, in any case, do not make the torture which strikes the psychically handicapped and isolates them in their pain any less scandalous. But behind the rational administration of pain in sanctions distributed by human courts, immediately dressing up dubious appearances of repression, the arbitrary and strange failure of justice amidst wars, crimes, and the oppression of the weak by the strong, rejoins, in a sort of fatality, the useless sufferings which spring from natural plagues as if effects of an ontological perversion. Beyond the fundamental malignity of suffering itself, revealed in its phenomenology, does not human experience in history attest to a malice and a bad will?

Western humanity has nonetheless sought for the meaning of this scandal by invoking the proper sense of a metaphysical order, an ethics, which is invisible in the immediate lessons of moral consciousness. This is a kingdom of transcendent ends, willed by a benevolent wisdom, by the absolute goodness of a God who is in some way defined by this supernatural goodness; or a widespread, invisible goodness in nature and history, where it would command the paths which are, to be sure, painful, but which lead to the Good. Pain is henceforth meaningful, subordinated in one way or another to the metaphysical finality envisaged by faith or by a belief in progress. These beliefs are presupposed by theodicy! Such is the grand idea necessary to the inner peace of souls in our distressed world. It is called upon to make sufferings here below comprehensible. These will make sense by reference to an original fault or to the congenital finitude of human being. The evil which fills the earth would be explained in a "plan of the whole"; it would be called upon to atone for a sin, or it would announce, to the ontologically limited consciousness, compensation or recompense at the end of time. These suprasensible perspectives are invoked in order to envisage in a suffering which is essentially gratuitous and absurd, and apparently arbitrary, a signification and an order.

Certainly one may ask if theodicy, in the broad and narrow senses of the term, effectively succeeds in making God innocent, or in saving morality in the name of faith, or in making suffering—and this is the true intention of the thought which has recourse to theodicy—bearable. By underestimating its temptation one

could, in any case, misunderstand the profundity of the empire which theodicy exerts over humankind, and the *epoch-making* character—or the *historical* character, as one says today—of its entry into thought. It has been, at least up to the trials of the twentieth century, a component of the self-consciousness of European humanity. It persisted in watered-down form at the core of atheist progressivism, which was confident, nonetheless, in the efficacy of the Good which is immanent to being, called to visible triumph by the simple play of the natural and historical laws of injustice, war, misery, and illness. As providential, nature and history furnished the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the norms of moral consciousness. They are associated with many essentials of the deism of the age of Enlightenment. But theodicy—ignoring the name that Leibniz gave to it in 1710—is as old as a certain reading of the Bible. It dominated the consciousness of the believer who explained his misfortunes by reference to the Sin, or at least by reference to his sins. In addition to the Christians' well-established reference to Original Sin, this theodicy is in a certain sense implicit in the Old Testament, where the drama of the diaspora reflects the sins of Israel. The wicked conduct of ancestors, still nonexpiated by the sufferings of exile, would explain to the exiles themselves the duration and the harshness of this exile.

The End of Theodicy

Perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness—but it is also an event in Sacred History—is that of the destruction of all balance between the explicit and implicit theodicy of Western thought and the forms which suffering and its evil take in the very unfolding of this century. This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of Right and Left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century which is drawing to a close in the haunting memory of the return of everything signified by these barbaric names: Suffering and evil are deliberately imposed, yet no reason sets limits to the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.

Among these events the Holocaust of the Jewish people under the reign of Hitler seems to us the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, where evil appears in its diabolical horror. This is perhaps not a subjective feeling. The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity. Its possibility puts into question the multi-millennial traditional faith. Did not the word of Nietzsche on the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the signification of a quasi-empirical fact? Is it necessary to be surprised, then, that this drama of Sacred History has had among its principal actors a people which, since forever, has been associated with this history, whose collective soul and destiny would be wrongly understood as limited to any sort of nationalism, and whose *gesture*, in certain circumstances, still belongs to revelation—be it as apocalypse—which “provokes thought” from philosophers or which impedes them from thinking?¹

Here I wish to evoke the analysis which the Canadian Jew the philosopher Emil Fackenheim of Toronto has made of this catastrophe of the human and the divine in his work, and notably in his book *God's Presence in History*:

The Nazi genocide of the Jewish people has no precedent within Jewish history. Nor . . . will one find a precedent outside Jewish history. . . . Even actual cases of genocide, however, still differ from the Nazi Holocaust in at least two respects. Whole peoples have been killed for “rational” (however horrifying) ends such as power, territory, wealth. . . . The Nazi murder . . . was annihilation for the sake of annihilation, murder for the sake of murder, evil for the sake of evil. Still more incontestably unique than the crime itself is the situation of the victims. The Albigensians died for their faith, believing unto death that

God needs martyrs. Negro Christians have been murdered for their race, able to find comfort in a faith not at issue. The more than one million Jewish children murdered in the Nazi Holocaust died neither because of their faith, nor despite their faith, nor for reasons unrelated to the Jewish faith [but] because of the Jewish faith of their great-grandparents [who brought] up Jewish children.²

The inhabitants of the Eastern European Jewish communities constituted the majority of the six million tortured and massacred; they represented the human beings least corrupted by the ambiguities of our world, and the million infants killed had the innocence of infants. Theirs is the death of martyrs, a death given in the torturers' unceasing destruction of the dignity which belongs to martyrs. The final act of this destruction is accomplished today in the posthumous denial of the very fact of martyrdom by the would-be “revisers of history.” This would be pain in its undiluted malignity, suffering for nothing. It renders impossible and odious every proposal and every thought which would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead. But does not this end of theodicy, which obtrudes itself in the face of this century's inordinate distress, at the same time in a more general way reveal the unjustifiable character of suffering in the other person, the scandal which would occur by my justifying my neighbor's suffering? So that the very phenomenon of suffering in its uselessness is, in principle the pain of the Other. For an ethical sensibility—confirming itself, in the inhumanity of our time, against this inhumanity—the justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality. Accusing oneself in suffering is undoubtedly the very turning back of the ego to itself. It is perhaps thus; and the for-the-other—

1. Maurice Blanchot, who is known for his lucid and critical attention to literature and events, notes somewhere: “How philosophize, how write in the memory of Auschwitz, of those who have said to us sometimes in notes buried near the crematories: ‘Know what has happened,’ ‘do not forget,’ and, at the same time, ‘You will never know?’” I think that all the dead of the Gulag and all the other places of torture in our political century are present when one speaks of Auschwitz. [Blanchot's words appear in his article “Our Clandes-

tine Companion,” translated by David Allison, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, edited by Richard Cohen (Albany, N.Y., 1986), p. 50; translator's addition.]

2. Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections after Auschwitz* (New York, 1970), pp. 69–70. [This work has been translated into French by M. Delmotte and B. Dupuy (Lagrasse, 1980): translator's note.] [For additional writings by Emil Fackenheim see pp. 420–449 above in this volume.]

the most upright relation to the Other—is the most profound adventure of subjectivity, its ultimate intimacy. But this intimacy can only be discreet. It could not be given as an example, or be narrated as an edifying discourse. It could not be made a predication without being perverted.

The philosophical problem, then, which is posed by the useless pain which appears in its fundamental malignancy across the events of the twentieth century, concerns the meaning that religiosity and the human morality of goodness can still retain after the end of theodicy. According to the philosopher we have just quoted, Auschwitz would paradoxically entail a revelation of the very God who nevertheless was silent at Auschwitz: a commandment of faithfulness. To renounce after Auschwitz this God absent from Auschwitz—no longer to assure the continuation of Israel—would amount to finishing the criminal enterprise of National Socialism, which aimed at the annihilation of Israel and the forgetting of the ethical message of the Bible, which Judaism bears, and whose multimillennial history is concretely prolonged by Israel's existence as a people. For if God was absent in the extermination camps, the devil was very obviously present in them. From whence, for Emil Fackenheim, comes the obligation for Jews to live and to remain Jews, in order not to be made accomplices of a diabolical project. The Jew, after Auschwitz, is pledged to his faithfulness to Judaism and to the material and even political conditions of its existence.

This final reflection of the Toronto philosopher, formulated in terms which render it relative

to the destiny of the Jewish people, can be given a universal signification. From Sarajevo to Cambodia humanity has witnessed a host of cruelties in the course of a century when Europe, in its "human sciences," seemed to reach the end of its subject, the humanity which, during all these horrors, breathed—already or still—the fumes of the crematory ovens of the "final solution" where theodicy abruptly appeared impossible. Is humanity, in its indifference, going to abandon the world to useless suffering, leaving it to the political fatality—or the drifting—of the blind forces which inflict misfortune on the weak and conquered, and which spare the conquerors, whom the wicked must join? Or, incapable of adhering to an order—or to a disorder—which it continues to think diabolic, must not humanity now, in a faith more difficult than ever, in a faith without theodicy, continue Sacred History, a history which now demands even more of the resources of the *self* in each one, and appeals to its suffering inspired by the suffering of the other person, to its compassion which is a non-useless suffering (or love), which is no longer suffering "for nothing," and which straightaway has a meaning? At the end of the twentieth century and after the useless and unjustifiable pain which is exposed and displayed therein without any shadow of a consoling theodicy, are we not all pledged—like the Jewish people to their faithfulness—to the second term of this alternative?³ This is a new modality in the faith of today, and also in our moral certainties, a modality quite essential to the modernity which is dawning.

3. We said above that theodicy in the broad sense of the term is justified by a certain reading of the Bible. It is evident that another reading of it is possible, and that in a certain sense nothing of the spiritual experience of human history is foreign to the Scriptures. We are thinking here in particular of the Book of Job which attests at once to Job's faithfulness to God (2:10) and to ethics (27:5 and 6), despite his sufferings without reason, and his opposition to the theodicy of his friends. He refuses theodicy right to the end and, in the last chapters of the text (42:7), is preferred to those who, hurrying to the safety of Heaven, would make God innocent before the suffering of the just. It is a little like the reading Kant makes of this book in his quite ex-

traordinary short treatise of 1791, *Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee* [*On the Failure of All the Philosophical Attempts at a Theodicy*], where he demonstrates the theoretical weakness of the arguments in favor of theodicy. Here is the conclusion of his way of interpreting what "this ancient book expresses allegorically": "In this state of mind Job has proven that he did not found his morality on faith, but his faith on morality; in which case faith, however weak it may be, is nonetheless one of a pure and authentic kind, a kind which does not found a religion of solicited favors, but a well-conducted life" (*welche eine Religion nicht der Gunstbewerbung, sondern des guten Lebenswandels grundet*).