

JAMES DODD

The New School for Social Research

VIOLENCE AND RELIGION, OR BETWEEN TYRANNY AND
CARE¹

I. *Violence and religion*

Often the discussion of religious violence, as with violence in general, tends to be guided by the question of the justification of violence as a *means*. Theological variants of just war theory are a case in point. So for example Aquinas, drawing on Augustine, develops a conception of a “just war” through essentially proscribing a series of moral constraints and conditions on the use of violence in war, demanding above all the goodness of the cause and that any war be waged in such a way that strives towards the restoration of peace as soon as possible.² Here a reflection on violence and the authority of religion meet, but only through the mediation of another, specifically political set of phenomena, where violence appears solely as a means and religion (or theology anyway) as a source of justification. In this way religion and violence confront one another on a terrain not their own, and one might argue that what most exercises our imagination when it comes to violence and religion is perhaps limited to just those difficulties and perplexities that arise when religion (or theology anyway) becomes political. There is much to reflect on here, since the ways in which religion and violence converge on the plane of the political can be quite complex, and in many ways wholly unpredictable; religion has after all provided the impetus and support for some of the most astonishing extremes in war and conflict, but it has also equally been the source of an often profound and moving rejection of violence and of war.

The purpose of this essay however is not to take up the question of religion as a potential source of justification for the uses of violence. Instead, the intent below is to pursue the possibility that there might be a more fundamental relation between violence and religion, one that is prior to justification, and which has to do with the very conditions for the possibility of each. The working hypothesis for what follows is that our experience of violence is rooted in the religious as a fundament of human existence, and that our experience of the religious is in turn rooted in violence as fundamental to the human condition.

In pursuit of this hypothesis, we will draw from two important phenomenological contributions to our understanding of both violence and religion. The first is Jean-Paul Sartre’s discussion of violence in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, written in 1947-48 soon after the composition of *Being and Nothingness* (1943); the second is

¹ A reworked and expanded version of this essay appears as Chapter 3, "Violence and Religion (On Levinas)," in James Dodd, *Phenomenological Reflections on Violence. A Skeptical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2017), 62-90.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II.2.1

Emmanuel Levinas' account of the origin of religiosity in his 1974 *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*.³ There are a number of reasons why these two texts are of importance for a reflection on religion and violence. Sartre provides a rigorous and precise description of the phenomenon of violence, one that does not shy away from its inherent ambiguities, above all with respect to the problem of subjectivity. Levinas, in *Otherwise Than Being*, provides an important and challenging account of the origin of ethical subjectivity in a religiosity that is shaped, if not decisively determined, by violence. Drawing from Levinas, this paper will outline a possible way to frame the argument that religion and violence are mutually constitutive; whereas from Sartre it will draw a set of descriptions of violence that are essential for its clarification.

II. Deep History

One is often warned not to pretend to be able to talk about "religion" as such, since the variety of religions and religious experiences is often lost in such generalizations, to the detriment of genuine understanding. This is above all the case when it comes to the question of the *origin* of religion, a question that is both internally and externally vexed. The question is internally vexed, given the often high degree of development within religious discourse and representation on precisely the subject of its origins; one might even hazard the generalization that a religion has reached an important stage of maturity just when it has accomplished a developed account of its origin, or even that at such a stage it is first recognizable as a religion *at all*. This means that when one seeks to open the question of origin from a philosophical or anthropological perspective, one invariably encounters the internal resistance of an often well-established tradition of self-interpretation, or at least understanding. This makes it difficult to pose the problem in terms other than the empty pretense of assessing the truth of a given religion, or its ideological consistency. The question is also externally vexed, given the simple fact that we exist in a world shaped by religious traditions with a history so thick, so intermingled with human existence in general, that the question of origins can be at most formulated as a hypothesis about conditions that have never been experienced, making possible an event of a kind that no one has ever witnessed. One never witnesses religion being born, but at best only the beginnings of another chapter of religious life in a world that has always already been fundamentally shaped by the primordial event of religion.

Navigating the space generated by these two vexations, it is however important not to shy away from appreciating the significance of the basic truth that religion is older than any theology, older than the definite forms of religious life that we are capable of recognizing. However vexed the question, we need to take seriously the significance of this basic fact, and in a sense the question of the origins of religion is just the question of making

³ J.-P. Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

sense of this fact. So, for example, the work of René Girard, who develops a theory of the constitutive role of the scapegoat in religious ritual, is both interesting and controversial precisely in this regard. Girard consciously pursues his analysis beyond what can be empirically established in order to speculate on the distant origins of religion, or as the title of one of his books has it, "things hidden since the foundation of the world."⁴

But perhaps even more important is to affirm that religion is older than many of the phenomena that have come to mediate it, fuse with it, or fold into its self-understanding. Thus, religion is not only older than theology, it is also older than empire, certainly older than the state, probably older than history, and may even be older than war. And, depending on how we conceive of the divine, or to what extent the thought of the divine is accessible to us beyond the conceptual constraints of theology, religion has a shot of even being older than God. Thus, despite all its risks and potential to mislead, it is philosophically incumbent upon us to pull the theme of religion away from the dominance of its familiar patterns of mediation in order to pose the question of its origin, and its possibility.

A reflection on religion, understood in this way as a depth problem of a certain kind, is also germane to the question of the very origin of humanity; and in fact one could say that what is at stake in this discussion is the role of the concepts of violence and religion in what we might call a deep history of the human condition.⁵ A particularly provocative articulation of this claim can be found, for example, in the work of Georges Bataille. In his *Theory of Religion* and writings on the cave paintings of Lascaux in southwestern France,⁶ Bataille speculates that the emergence of humanity can be understood in terms of an event of *separation*, one in which the human becomes defined by the pre-human animal being pushed away from its own animality, but without a complete rupture or escape. This troubled separation emerges as a unique modality of exposure, one that, Bataille argues, results from a dialectic between the first archaic cultivation or care for life, and the ageless immediacy of an animality submerged in being, "like water in water."⁷ Bataille, under the influence here of Alexandre Kojève, understands this in very Hegelian terms: the cultivation in question is one in which an understanding and its world of object relations has given an otherwise animal life a definite shape, and it is in or as this shape that life exposes its

⁴ R. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. S. Bann, and M. Metteer, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

⁵ I borrow this phrase from the recently emerging and fascinating interdisciplinary field that aims to extend "history" into the distant human past, or what used to be called "pre-history," by a synthetic approach that incorporates evolutionary biology, geology, anthropology, and virtually any discipline that is able to contribute to reconstructing the distant past of the species. See A. Shryock, and D. L. Small. *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁶ G. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*. Trans. R. Hurley, (New York: Zone Books, 1992); G. Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, trans. M. Kendall, and S. Kendall, (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

⁷ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 17-25.

animality to the negation of its immediacy. The key outcome of this movement of negation is a being that is characterized by an elevated consciousness of time, one that is oriented to *duration* as that shape of time thanks to which cultivated life is at all possible. And it is this apprehension of life in duration that is in turn the basis of a new sense of *fragility*—not the danger of animal life, but the brittle fragility of the works of understanding, or the being of a specifically *projected* existence.⁸

In Bataille's account, primordial religion coalesces around a double violence inherent to this exposure of projected life. First is the violence of separation itself, of the break from animal existence, where animality is not extinguished, but remains as an Other within. Separation is thus more of a wound than a clean break; and it takes the specific form of a refusal to allow the unfolding of animal suffering to remain, or even be animal. In the wake of this trauma of separation there takes root another violence, one in which this inwardly suppressed but still functioning animality disrupted by the first violence becomes expressed, but now as embodied in the form of an external object of *fascination*. This object is the external violence of the animal as such. If the violence of the true animal becomes an object of fascination, it is because it is an outside violence capable of symbolically folding into its expression the inward wound of the first violence, that original violence of self-imposed animal suffering that is no longer allowed to be animal. This is why for Bataille it is the images of animals, not humans, which predominate in the cave paintings of Lascaux, and with that why the images of the killing and dying of animals possess a uniquely *religious* character.⁹ Religion is thus understood as having its origin in a violence that, though aimed at the suppression of animality, also makes it manifest, but now in a form marked by dread, anxiety, wonder and fascination. In sum, religion for Bataille begins as humanity's utter bafflement with itself, coupled with an obsession with the intimacy of an animality that can only appear in the immediate form of the sacrifice of the cultivated world, of the things we make and the things we have become. This religiosity is attached to and animated through images, all grounded in the archaic experience of the disrupted, problematically animal existence of the human being.

The very possibility for religion in Bataille arguably lies in the fact that animality is something that *can* be disrupted, and that this disruption can take the form of a violence that threatens from *within*, whether within understanding, or within the unity of whatever regime of care that the durations of projected life have made possible. Ultimately, Bataille wants to understand the notion of the sacred that emerges here in *economic* terms, specifically in terms of an economy oriented around expenditure and destruction.¹⁰ However, we can also approach this

⁸ Ibid., 27-64.

⁹ See the following three key essays, all found in G. Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity*: "The Passage from Animal to Man and the Birth of Art," "Prehistoric Religion," and "The Cradle of Humanity: The Vézère Valley."

¹⁰ And for this reason the writings on religion and primitive art form an important supplement to Bataille's project in his 1949 *La partie*

phenomenon of disrupted animality through the figure of *tyranny*, and with that, I believe, take a step closer to a more nuanced reflection on the problem of religious violence. For the possibility of tyranny, or the ungovernable expansion of desire beyond the limits of justice, can be conceived as founded on the irrevocable defect of a similarly exposed, disrupted animality that destabilizes human existence from within. So Levinas, reflecting in an early essay on the problem of tyranny in Plato, points to what he calls the *contagion* of animality as the source of tyranny. For “free thought,” Levinas writes,

[...] is not simply the consciousness of a tyranny exercised over our animality; it is not a mere spectator of this destitute animality agitated by fear and love; reason does not simply recognize this animality in us—it is as it were infected by it from within. The threat of tyranny is not simply known by reason; it puts reason in distress, paradoxical as the expression “a reason moved” may seem. The despotism of the senses constitutes the source of tyranny. The incomprehensible union of reason and animality, a union underlying their distinctness, makes a mockery of autonomy.¹¹

And later, in an important essay from 1954, “The Ego and the Totality,” what Levinas calls the “total humanization of the Other” will be described as a break from animality, though without its erasure. An original passivity, animality is fundamentally superseded in its humanization in the face, or rather in the face of an interlocutor in discourse: “The particularity of the other in language, far from representing his animality or constituting the remains of an animality, constitutes the total humanization of the other.”¹² Yet again this is a break that does not erase the *sources* of tyranny. For Levinas, the contagion of animality, and with that the potential for tyranny, will always remain on the level of the work, of labor, of concrete historical existence in the world. This contagion is what exposes the human being to a violence that would enable one ego to ambush another in a manner of injustice, exploitation, or alienation.

The philosophical aims of Bataille and Levinas are of course quite different, but there is a common thread here that merits reflection: namely the idea of a remainder of a minimized, disrupted and separated animality, the legacy of the double emergence of cultivated being as care and the possibility of tyranny, thanks to which an intrinsically threatened and exposed *passivity* is posited at the heart of human existence. For both Bataille and Levinas, I would argue, it is from such a passivity that we are capable of experiencing violence as something more than mere force; it is also from this passivity that a primordial religiosity, more basic than either faith or theology, finds its origin. And the figure of

maudite. See G. Bataille *The Accursed Share. Volume I: Consumption*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

¹¹ E. Levinas, “Freedom and Command (1953),” in: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 16.

¹² E. Levinas, “The Ego and the Totality,” in: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 42.

tyranny, I would argue, is potentially more fruitful for our question of the relation between religion and violence, since it forces us to reflect on the consequences of the passivity of exposed animality for the problem of religion, instead of limiting its sense to a given drive towards destruction. In other words, I would argue that it is between tyranny and care, and not expenditure and accumulation, that we will find what we need to grasp a potential inner relation between religion and violence.

III. Intentionality and Decomposition

It is clear that we need to grapple more effectively with what we mean by both “violence” and “religion,” in order to make any sense of this idea of the constitutive role of passivity. Before we turn to Levinas in order to pursue the problem of the origin of religiosity, let us first to turn to Sartre’s *Notebooks for an Ethics* in order to bring into play a more robust set of phenomenological descriptions of violence to help better frame the argument.

There are two problems that are essential to thinking violence, each of which plays a central role in Sartre’s reflections in the *Notebooks*. The first is the problem of how an intention, or a project, can be something that has the density of the worldly, the given, or the historical. Intentions make up the directions, the paths and significations constitutive of the sense of order as such. As worldly, an intention is something confronted and met in a situation, as either a given unity of movement, or one that lacks unity but at least sets into play the promise of an order, pattern, or structure. Intentions are for example at the very core of the being of an *artifact*: they make up the orderability of artifacts, situate them in contexts, and render them comprehensible for use. This street is meant to take us to the square; the park bench has been placed here for the sake of rest and the enjoyment of the view of the valley. Intentions given and established, concrete and embedded in the sense of things, shape the landscape of worldly existence, conditioning the possibilities of encounter and action. Thus, the problem of how intentions become concrete is central to the problem of the basic ways in which a world is disclosed, and the modes of access that allow us to enter into it.

The second, related problem is that of the subject, and in a double sense. On the one hand is the constitution of the self of intentional life, the one who through experience and understanding both influences and submits to the conduits of pattern. On the other hand is the constitution of the Other who belongs to a world in which all intentions are subject to manifestation within a space of encounter, thus giving the encounter between oneself and another, and then on to the third, its organization and unity. The encounter of oneself and another is mutual, if not necessarily reciprocal; the Other encounters my intentions, just as I do those of the Other, and we may even have each others’ intentions as intentions. This possibility of intending another’s intentions, means that an Other is not simply a project that one comes across as if from the outside, but a project that potentially has one’s own life, one’s consciousness of intentions as such in view, and thus is able to engage the manner in which one is to experience an order

of things—so for example when a friend has me over for dinner, and orchestrates the satisfaction of my desires for food, conversation, and company.

This means that the subject is not merely a spider spinning a web of intentions, like Nabokov's macabre image of Humbert Humbert scheming from his upstairs bedroom, which would subsequently come into combination with other strands from other lives equally busy generating patterns of intentional order. For the otherness of the subject also carries within it the potential to stand against, in the way, and in conflict with the intentions it encounters, by influencing the order of intentions in which they are set. An Other, as another intentional being, can frustrate, even unravel what has been accomplished and met in the order of given intentions. Herein lies the potential for violence, but only as one mode of conflict among others. That is, violence is a specific kind of resistance to the intentions that make up the concrete existence of the other. Sartre describes this as a species of *refusal* to accept a given intention or order as a set of conditions that have been made concrete in the movement of intentional life, as a concrete situation in the world. Taken in its purity, violence is a refusal, to use Sartre's expression, "to be born"—that is, to submit to the concrete necessity of the intentions of others met and experienced in the world: "I [as violent] refuse to enter into a series of operations that have already been marked out [...] which indicate that men have intended me in their intentions."¹³

Thus, violence does not simply seek to dismantle, or even to oppose. A friend can for example disagree without violence, by lovingly taking apart one's argument until, again without violence, one finally admits the fact of the friend's superior reasoning, and can no longer even imagine inhabiting a world in which it would be possible to think otherwise. Violence is not mere otherness and confrontation, but a strategy, or a posture of refusal that seeks, as if by magic, to shatter the demands of the concrete, thus to surpass any need to submit at all to a given order of the concrete. Violence thus does not seek to *influence* the order of things, but to render that order *inessential*, to break the circuit of acceptance basic to intentional life and instead confront the given as an opaque mass to be engaged only through its destruction. This notion of violence as a *refusal of essence*, or a refusal that seeks to render the positive being of an intention inessential, is the first determination of violence that I wish to draw from Sartre.¹⁴

Sartre accordingly describes violence as a subjective posture of playing at the absolute; the subject refuses to be born, to be borne along by patterns of others and of oneself that have already been set into place in the world of encounter. In this way the subject of violence thus seeks to effectively *disappear*, or to become *decomposed* in a manner that slips away from the obstacle of a future that is in the process of being born in and of the present.¹⁵ Violence in this sense is the freedom of a subject aimed exclusively

¹³ J.-P. Sartre, *Notebooks*, 175; also: "Violence is the refusal of being looked at." (*ibid.*, 176)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

at *closing* the movement of the present towards its future; it is thus at once incomprehensible, since it does not submit to any need for agreement, and at the same time *unavoidable*, since it is the refusal to submit to any conditions for being allowed.¹⁶ One can avoid the violence of another only by directing its unavoidability elsewhere, allowing it to feed on some other region of positive being. Violence thus brings together a moment of dissolution, of *decomposition*, with a moment of unavoidability, and with that a certain kind of unreal necessity. The consequence is that violence is in a sense fundamentally non-phenomenal; it represents a resistance to manifestation, and in this sense also a necessity, or at least a demand, that runs against the grain of the order of manifest being as such. This anarchic, ungovernable relation to phenomenality, where violence is manifest as an inexorable dissolution of manifestation, is the second determination of violence that I wish to borrow from Sartre.

Sartre also argues that, however ungovernable its relation to manifestation, violence can nevertheless be instrumentalized, and with that given a determinate and lasting place in the world.¹⁷ Thus violence, like subjective intentions in general, can become a part of the landscape of human things; violence has its posited and positive legacies. War is perhaps the most important example of this, and in an important sense it is also representative of the norm. For Sartre, pure destruction, the pure orgy of a sustained violence, can only be conceived as an ideal limit.¹⁸ Actual violence is more like war, since it is confined to an interval, a disruption of one order coupled either with an intention that aims at another, or the brute passage to something else that inevitably fills whatever void has been opened by violence. For order always emerges in the wake of violence, and the political character of war finds its ground in the possibility in employing the nascent potentialities for the re-emergence of order in the wake of violence towards shaping the political future.

The example of war also shows that it is possible to speak of the violence of *an order*—or of a violence instrumentalized, made concrete, for the purposes or ends of order, such as a new peace, or a lasting legacy of a will to order. This is the third and final determination of violence that I wish to borrow from Sartre. Its importance has to do with the recognition that violence is not reducible to the immediate being of subjective acts, even if in a larger sense it finds its ultimate ground in subjectivity. Instead, violence often has to do with the manner in which an order is an order, precisely as a given, established reality. This is what Walter Benjamin has in view in *The Critique of Violence*, with what he calls a “law-preserving” violence. Law-preserving violence constitutes the *force of law*: the violence of the law is one that belongs to a given order that anticipates resistance and opposition, and

¹⁶ In this sense violence is a strategy being both a pure freedom and the unavoidability of given being: “He is man (that is, pure destructive consciousness) when he destroys the given in itself of the world and he is a *thing* when he destroys man.” (*Ibid.*,176)

¹⁷ This facet of the reality of violence is developed in more detail in: J.-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London; New York: Verso/New Left Books, 2004), 718; cf. 726-737.

¹⁸ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 172-173.

employs the absolute refusal of violence in order to suppress the exception, or the possibility of its order unraveling, in which an action would take an unanticipated or *illegal* course.¹⁹

René Girard offers a different analysis of the violence of order—and here a specifically religious notion of order is in view—by way of his theory of victimization.²⁰ For Girard, ritual, the sacred, is in its essence a “legalistic” violence, but it is not one that aims at the *preservation* of a given legal order. It is instead directed against a more primordial violence, one that arises from a generalized mimetic conflict that begins with a competition over things and quickly transforms into a general enmity. The sacrificial victim stands at the heart of a set of practices and rituals aimed at defusing and stepping back from the precipice of this generalized violence—and it is in this way that archaic religion takes shape as a fundamental event that separates human beings from their own animality. Religion according to Girard’s analysis thus takes the form of a complicated instance of a kind of *counter-violence*—one that forces a generalized violence into a trap, so to speak, in order to escape its consequences, or at least the crisis. Sacrifice in Girard’s theory is thus a kind of primitive legality, one that functions as such only in societies where the judicial system is lacking, that is, societies that are incapable of a rational management of guilt and punishment.²¹ For proper legal structures replace the violence of scapegoating with that of the institutionalization of *vengeance*:

If our own system seems to be more rational, it is because it conforms more strictly to the principle of vengeance. Its insistence on the punishment of the guilty party underlines this fact. Instead of following the example of religion and attempting to forestall acts of revenge, to mitigate or sabotage its effects, or to redirect them to secondary objects, our judicial system ‘rationalizes’ revenge and succeeds in limiting and isolating its effects in accordance with social demands. The system treats the disease without fear of contagion and provides a highly effective technique for the cure and, as a secondary effect, the prevention of violence.²²

One might wonder here whether Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morals* has a more convincing account of the rise of the legal juridical order, namely his assertion that the stronger a society feels, the less it experiences any need for vengeance, and with that

¹⁹ W. Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in idem, *Selected Writings. Volume One: 1913-1926*, trans. M. Bullock, and M. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 241.

²⁰ See above all R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (New York: Continuum, 2005).

²¹ Ibid., 19: “[...] ritual in general, and sacrificial rites in particular, assume essential roles in societies that lack a firm judicial system. It must not be assumed, however, that sacrifice simply ‘replaces’ a judicial system. One can scarcely speak of replacing something that never existed to begin with.” Religion, in other words, is older than law as well.

²² Ibid., p. 23.

the need for the means to avoid violence.²³ Still, the most important element here is Girard's introduction of a *mimetic violence*, or a violence that feeds on itself, threatening to increase in accordance with a cycle driven by repetition until all resources and parties have been exhausted. Ritual, the sacred, are structures that result from a counter-violence that disrupts vengeance, that breaks the mimetic circuit—and continues to frustrate the repetition at the heart of violence, as a kind of paradoxical *violence against violence*:

Religion invariably strives to subdue violence, to keep it from running wild. Paradoxically, the religious and moral authorities in a community attempt to instill nonviolence, as an active force into daily life and as a mediating force into ritual life, through the application of violence.²⁴

Here one thinks of a remark in Engels: "The essence of the State, as that of religion, is mankind's fear of itself."²⁵

The idea of the violence of an order also lies behind the concept of modern war as a totalizing phenomenon, where "total war" does not simply measure the amount of effort or resources employed, as it was in Clausewitz, but instead expresses the extent to which war has come to determine the very form of reality itself. Such a reality, as Levinas argues in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, is one in which "nothing is exterior" and which "destroys the identity of the same."²⁶ The disruption of war, as the disruption of exteriority and sameness, is inscribed in an ordering that re-totalizes the world again and again out of and with violence, to the point where being among things, inscribed in the movement of this constant folding of destruction and ordering, *just is war*. "War," to again quote Levinas, "is the deed or the drama of essence's interest."²⁷ Interest here means, to use a Husserlian expression, "inter-esse," being among things, rooted in a space of strife, of conflict, which for Levinas is implicated in the very figure of *ontology*.

²³ See section 10 of Essay II in F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. C. Dieth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 51: "It is not impossible to imagine society *so conscious of its power* that it could allow itself the noblest luxury available to it,—that of letting its malefactors go unpunished."

²⁴ R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 21.

²⁵ F. Engels, *Schriften aus der Friihzeit*, ed. G Mayer (Berlin: Springer, 1920), 281.

²⁶ "But violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action. Not only modern war but every war employs arms that turn against those who wield them. It establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same." E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A Lingis (New York: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21.

²⁷ E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 4-5.

IV. Redemptive Violence

The struggle against war, so important to Levinas, is thus a struggle against the interests of essence, of being that finds its particular force in the form of the movement of totalization. As such, Levinas tells us in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, a fundamental opposition to war risks being dismissed as mere naïveté; to consistently reject its violence risks being accused of turning away from the essence of the real. Any realist will tell you that there can be no opposition to war that could break decisively with the totality on terms that would not almost certainly be again refolded back into the concrete violence of totalization itself. Any break or struggle would require force, whether physical or moral, and it is only the violence of essence that makes available the possibility for struggle and resistance as such—even, or perhaps especially when it has to do with a struggle against the dramas of war. The challenge for Levinas is thus clear: “moral consciousness can sustain the mocking gaze of the political man only if the certitude of peace dominates the evidence of war.”²⁸ Haunting any attempt to establish such a certainty in the face of the evidence of war is the specter of an even more intractable hold of violence on human beings, conjured by the very struggle against violence itself:

The true problem for us Westerners is not so much to refuse violence as to question ourselves about a struggle against violence which, without blanching in non-resistance to evil, could avoid the institution of violence out of this very struggle.²⁹

The non-ontological violence of a struggle against violence would be meaningful only if it were possible to conceive of a violence directed at violence—but without being a counter-violence, without being the violence of an order in the sense of Benjamin or Girard, or even Sartre. This, I want to argue, is just what Levinas is attempting to think, and what emerges from his attempt is a distinctive account of the meaning of the religious.

One might pose the question in this form: what does the violence of resistance have to be, in order for it neither to be an act of war, nor the movement of a counter-violence that would seek to either disrupt or render inessential the violence of the totality? Perhaps one might just affirm that it must be a decidedly “naïve” violence—that is, a violence that does not seek to destroy, that does not seek to harm, that does not seek anything other than an absolute refusal of essence that shakes nothing, disturbs nothing, brings nothing but an expectation of peace. But what could this mean?

Sartre’s approach sketched above might help as a point of departure for conceiving of a violence other than that of essence. Or rather: we can pursue such a thinking through considering a set of possible modifications of the basic determinations of

²⁸ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22.

²⁹ E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 177.

violence that we have borrowed from Sartre. Thus we might describe a violence that resists essence, rendering it inessential, but which for all that does not “refuse to be born.” Perhaps it is not a *refusal* at all, in that it is a violence that instead demands the birth of something otherwise decomposed than the violence of the totality. Perhaps it would be a birth, a coming into being, even into essence, that is “violent” only to the extent to which it resists an order of manifestation saturated with violence, and this from out of a distinctive posture of decomposure in the face of its demands. Again not as a decomposure of disruptive refusal, of a freedom that would declare war on the very movement of order, but rather a peculiar decomposure that Levinas often pursues under the label of *anarchy*.

Let us try to make this possibility of a non-violent violence more definite by taking up some themes important to the exposition of Levinas’ thinking as we find it in *Otherwise Than Being*. The first thing to emphasize is that the origin of the ethical in this text depends on a *given positivity* to be torn apart, rent asunder, and in this sense decomposed. This given positivity is what Levinas calls *enjoyment (jouissance)*, which is basic to the life of selfhood, and its disruption constitutes the principal narrative thread of Levinas’ text.³⁰

So for example one of the most common refrains in *Otherwise Than Being*, always repeated with pathos, is the image of “bread being torn from my mouth,” torn to give to the Other, in and as a response to the Other.³¹ The Other defines the terminus of this tearing apart of enjoyment—it is *towards the Other* that the ego is torn from *itself*. This being-torn is understood by Levinas to be a violence that has its origin not in the Other, but in the fundamental passivity constitutive of enjoyment itself, as life. This amounts to the thesis that passivity forms the determining ground of the event of ethical existence: the violence that tears me from myself towards the Other emerges *from within* a passivity that bears the origin of a trajectory of a self-laceration turned *outwards*. Coming from within, this laceration begins as it were behind egoity, in a passivity that harbors its disruption like an ancient secret, one that promises the movement of its own destruction towards the Other.³²

The enjoyment of bread is thus not simply negated as one possibility among others; instead the whole existence of enjoyment, its whole being, is torn to pieces from within, in a way

³⁰ Ibid., especially 72-74. “[...] enjoyment is the singularization of the ego in its coiling back upon itself. Winding of a skein, it is the very movement of egoism. [...] Without egoism, complacent in itself, suffering would not have any sense.” (Ibid., 73)

³¹ So for example ibid., 74, in connection with the theme of enjoyment: “And to be torn from oneself despite oneself has meaning only as a being torn from the complacency in oneself characteristic of enjoyment, snatching the bread from one’s mouth.”

³² “Subjectivity, locus and null-site of this breakup [of signification, substitution for the Other – JD], comes to pass as a passivity more passive than all passivity. To the diachronic past, which cannot be recuperated by representation effected by memory or history, that is, incommensurable with the present, corresponds or answers the unassumable passivity of the self.” (Ibid., 14)

that there is no question of recovery. There is thus an irrevocability, or an irreversibility of the “bread torn from one’s mouth.” We can say that the subjectivity that emerges from this disruption represents a kind of birth, but not of something that would replace the concrete subject of enjoyment with a structurally more complex being. The event of ethical existence is not the achievement of a complexity out of a dialectical mediation of the concrete immediacy of enjoyment and the transcendent demand represented by the other; passivity is not, in other words, a superseded moment of concreteness. Rather, what is born is more of a *situation* than a *subject*, more a condition passively fated than an ethical personality actively established. It is the condition of an exposure, as if we could speak of a wound being born, or an agony.

Levinas, unlike some of his interpreters, does not hesitate to give this being laid bare the name of *violence*:

Responsibility goes beyond being. In sincerity, in frankness, in the veracity of this saying, in the uncoveredness of suffering, being is altered. But this saying remains, in its activity, a passivity, more passive than all passivity, for it is a sacrifice without reserve, without holding back, and in this non-voluntary—the sacrifice of a hostage designated who has not chosen himself to be a hostage, but possibly elected by the Good, in an involuntary election not assumed by the elected one. For the Good can not enter into a present nor be put into a representation. But being Good it redeems the violence of its alterity, even if the subject has to suffer through the augmentation of this ever more demanding violence.³³

Violence is intrinsic to exposure; the subject is born as a being forced into the open where it suffers the outrages and crimes of the other—for the other is not given in innocence, even in an innocent distress thankful for any love extended, but explicitly as an *affront*, a source of blows from which the subject has no inward resistance or means of escape. Yet the cheek turned towards the smiter without reserve, another recurring image of *Otherwise Than Being*,³⁴ which has its origin in the exposure of the self to an exteriority that wells up from within its own passivity, is again not a counter-violence to the violence of the Other. One does not struggle, one does not love; rather one first emerges as helpless, exposed, shelterless and vulnerable. If what is thereby born is a situation of *demand*, it is one in which the subject is exposed to a demand from which it cannot defend itself, or put any distance between itself and what the demand demands. The result is thus not a demand that takes something *from me*, leaving the rest of me behind in a diminished but still intact state; nor is it a demand that I could agree to, that would obey an economy that would somehow preserve some of me, even some of me that I would be able to give. It is instead a non-derivable demand, completely indifferent to the rhythms of my essence, which expresses itself

³³ Ibid., 15.

³⁴ Ibid., 49; cf. ibid., 111.

only in the trauma along which my existence has been torn apart from its own egoity, its own essential potential for inward-turning and resting enjoyment.

It is hard not to think of the violence of this exposure as a catastrophe. Yet Levinas tells us that this violence, emerging out of passivity, exposing us without remainder to the affront to being that is the other, is nevertheless a violence that redeems; *destruction* is here *redemption*.³⁵ The notion of redemption arguably represents Levinas' ultimate answer to the question of whether it is possible to think of a violence directed at violence, but without being counter-violence. And it is perhaps one of the most difficult ideas in a very difficult book. The attempt is to tie the thought of redemption to a kind of destruction that also has the signification of a being-elected, or a being chosen to responsibility. Responsibility and destruction are bound together to the extent that the election to the former comes out of radical passivity, or from a past that has never been present. For responsibility is not chosen, not voluntary, but takes the form of a being that suffers its own responsibility, that first experiences it by being exposed to it through its passive being. That the subject speaks, that it is a saying that eludes the logic of the said, has its origin in its consumption, its *obsession* by a responsibility inaugurated in a demanding violence that consumes it from within, sacrificing itself "despite itself." The ground of redemption and expiation is this being chosen, whereby the subject is pulled into a destruction of itself, without reserve or choice, by and for what lies beyond any economy of being.

This of course raises more questions than it answers. How is this despite all of Levinas' pronouncements to the contrary not an act of war, one in which passivity has become the battlefield of a war, however ancient and immemorial, being waged by the Good on the subject of enjoyment? How is this not, in other words, a form of tyranny—not at the hands of another subject, to be sure, but nevertheless at the hands of a violence of being chosen that contaminates one's life? It is not enough to identify what lies beyond being, what chooses, as the Good, and then to argue that the destruction caused by the Good can never be calculated within the logic of essence. For that would be no different from any violence that takes the form of a refusal, out of the decomposition of being, of the compulsions of essence. A reflection on just this idea of the redemption of the Good, of the reabsorption of transcendence, may certainly be Levinas' answer to how violence can be other than an act of war, but it remains a vexing mystery—what is being recovered that was lost? Why is not the destruction of this divine violence in and of itself an original loss? And how can the destruction of good violence specifically be said to *redeem*, if by redemption we inevitably mean reconstitute, recover, and return?

V. Religiosity, or: The Condition of the Hostage

³⁵ Ibid., 11, 15; also 123: "In this trauma the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of non-freedom."

In grappling with these questions, it is important to emphasize that Levinas explicitly rejects the possibility of thinking of the redemptive violence of the Good in terms of redemption *gained*, as a status or virtue that could figure in an economy of ethical determinations. Consider the difficult passage:

To lend the cheek to the smiter and to be filled with shame," to demand suffering in the suffering undergone (without producing the act that would be the exposing of the other cheek) is not to draw from suffering some kind of magical redemptive virtue. In the trauma of persecution it is to pass from the outrage undergone to the responsibility for the persecutor, and, in this sense from suffering to expiation for the other.³⁶

Responsibility is not the payoff, the state or status of recovery from suffering, from outrage, in order then to be in a position to forgive, judge, or understand. There is no turning the other cheek, no gift of love that lifts the wounded subject into a capacity to forgive. Instead, the passage here is from the shock of exposure to expiation, to a reconciliation with violence that takes the form of that peculiar limbo of what Levinas calls a *hostage*, or the point of *substitution*: "[...] for under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage."³⁷

The sense of responsibility as a kind of destruction finds its meaning and expression in this figure of the hostage, and the meaning of redemption is in turn tied to the condition of the hostage as a situation of violence. And again it is a destruction that arises out of passivity, one that is older than the ego itself, older than the very self's potential as egoity. And it is just this condition that Levinas wants to give the name of "religiosity." Religiosity is that being-hostage the origin of which precedes any ego posited for itself, thus any figure of egoism or altruism, and which guarantees its absolute destruction:

[...] in the "prehistory" of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles. What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be. Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the self.³⁸

Religion, in other words, or perhaps religiosity, is older than love, older than reason, and its violence shakes both, from within a passivity that harbors a deep history. The persecuted being of the

³⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

³⁷ Ibid., 112.

³⁸ Ibid., 117; religiosity, but also religion: "[...] the trace of saying, which has never been present, obliges me; the responsibility for the other, never assumed, binds me; a command never heard is obeyed. [...] It is the trace of a relationship with illeity that no unity of apperception grasps, ordering me to responsibility. This relationship is religion, exceeding the psychology of faith and the loss of faith. It orders me in an anarchic way, without ever becoming or being made into a presence or a disclosure of a principle." (Ibid., 168)

hostage, which lies outside of the open horizon of its being as such, represents the passive abyss of an ancient violence, a trauma that reaches the subject out of a passivity that it cannot assimilate into the territory of choice, comprehensibility, or intentional life in general. This violence is not, as in the violence I choose or even experience as given in the world, a pure refusal. It is instead uniquely directed to me in my exposed passivity, or in a passivity that is earlier than anything that would belong to egoity. Persecution, this already having me through that which in me is unconscious—and how can we not think here of the theme of animality, sketched above in relation to Bataille?—is thus a trauma arising out of passivity, without explanation, apology, or *logos*:

Persecution is trauma, violence par excellence without warning nor *a priori*, without possible apology, without *logos*. Persecution leads back to a resignation not consented to, and consequently crosses a night of unconsciousness. That is the sense of the unconscious, night in which the reverting of the ego into itself under the trauma of persecution occurs, a passivity more passive still than every passivity on this side of identity, responsibility, substitution.³⁹

Yet to speak of the violence of *saying*, of the substitution for the other that occurs beyond the determinations of totality, of the *said*, is not to pit the pure subjectivity of saying against the pure objectivity of the whole, as if the latter were constituted as a mere obstacle, just so much density of existence to be annihilated. Rather, everything is left standing, even the movement of the said as the totalizing of everything. For in the end the said, totalization, even totalizes the redemptive violence of the Good. Since it leaves everything standing, this saying of responsibility must inevitably, of necessity, submit to the light—for its violence is not the posture of a counter-necessity, one that would replace the necessity of openness, of manifestation with another. It is rather an interruption of necessity, of interestedness itself, which nevertheless requires coming into the light of interest:

But one has to say that the gratuity nonetheless required of substitution, the miracle of ethics before the light, this astonishing saying, comes to light through the very gravity of the questions that assail it. It must spread out and assemble itself into essence, posit itself, be hypostatized, become an eon of consciousness and knowledge, let itself be seen, undergo the ascendancy of being. Ethics itself, in its saying which is a responsibility, requires this hold.⁴⁰

At this point we might ask: does the Good, as that for which there is an augmentation of demanding violence, redeem the violence of the light, the light of the world itself? Here the question seems to be equivalent to: does the Good, in destroying the light of the world, transpose it into responsibility? This would mean, to put it into Heideggerean terms, the transformation of the openness to or

³⁹ Ibid., 197-198 (fn27).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 44.

lighting of human existence into something *other* than what allows beings to emerge into phenomenality. But what would such a transformation of the lighting of being, of the openness of Dasein, mean?

In Levinas, as in Heidegger (or for that matter Husserl), *time* plays a fundamental role in any modification of being as openness. It is as *temporalization* that the same allows for openness as such, in that the essence of being is time:

This modification without alteration or displacement, being's essence or time [...] This modification is precisely the visibility of the same to the same, which is sometimes called openness. [...] Being's essence is a dissipating of opacity, not only because this 'drawing out' of being would have to have been first understood so that truth could be told about things, events and acts that are; but because this drawing out is the *original dissipation* of opaqueness. In it forms are illuminated whose knowledge is awakened; in it being leaves the night, or, at least, quits sleep, that night of night, for an inextinguishable insomnia of consciousness.⁴¹

What is definitive of substitution in its relation to light is that it amounts to a peculiar *exception to time*, to this movement of the dissipation of opaqueness. The saying is not a new light, nor is it the destruction of the light. The destruction basic to religiosity is rather the destruction of time, a violence directed at the violence of the open through its time. This is another scene in which the violence of the religious is not a refusal: it is not or opaqueness that resists insomnia, nor the light, as if the night had turned aside its own dissipation and refused to lift. Religiosity is the destruction of time as a before or otherwise than time, a before or otherwise that disturbs time and in this sense redeems it. But this takes place only within a non-phenomenality, one that is in turn determinative of the nature of the face, of the other; it is an othering that does not participate in the movement from opacity to openness, from the mythical closure of passivity to its openness to form and knowledge. It is, in other words, a disturbance of the temporality of time, which itself does not happen "in time":

Proximity is a disturbance of the rememberable time. One can call that apocalyptically the break-up of time. But it is a matter of an effaced but untamable diachrony of non-historical, non-said time, which cannot be synchronized in a present by memory and historiography, where the present is but the trace of an immemorial past. The obligation aroused by the proximity of the neighbor is not to the measure of the images he gives me; it concerns me before or otherwise. Such is the sense of the non-phenomenality of the face.⁴²

Yet for all that time remains fundamental to the being of passivity. Levinas ties the time of passivity to ageing, and with that to

⁴¹ Ibid., 30.

⁴² Ibid., 89.

something other than openness, but also other than the violence of substitution.⁴³ Time is even itself described by Levinas as an originary violence that underlies subjective being or openness itself, to the extent to which the latter constitutes a passive obedience to time—or a patience of subjectivity that is prior to action, prior to the verb, and by extension prior to anything that would even be made visible within the circuit of openness itself:

The temporalization prior to the verb, or in a verb without a subject, or in the patience of a subject that lies as it were on the underside of the active ego, is the patience of ageing. It is not a position taken with regard to one's death, but a lassitude, a passive exposure to being which is not assumed, an exposure to death—which thus is invisible, premature, always violent.⁴⁴

VI. "As if under a leaden sun"

If there is a violence of what Levinas calls the *said*, it is the violence of indifference, a kind of structural violence that belongs to the manifestation of form, or of being that absorbs alterity into an order, a positionality—in short a world. War as the interest of essence is just a special form of this. If there is a violence of what Levinas calls *saying*, it is a violence of exposure—just as structural perhaps, though now non-positional, the violence of non-thematization as an uncovering of a subject as a life *exposed*:

Here exposure has a sense radically different from thematization. The one is exposed to the other as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter. On the hither side of the ambiguity of being and entities, prior to the *said*, saying uncovers the one that speaks, not as an object disclosed by theory, but in a sense that one discloses oneself by neglecting one's defenses, leaving a shelter, exposing oneself to outrage, to insults and wounding.⁴⁵

This idea of a violence of exposure without thematization means that it cannot be the basis of a shared perspective with the agency that appears behind insults, outrage, and wounding. The violence of exposure in this sense is not complicit with violence in the sense that we fixed in our discussion of Sartre; it is not a posture, or an adoption of a perspective on the intentional being of another as an inessential, mute, opaque blockage to be negated, to be destroyed. It is, instead, a disruption of essence, a troubling of time from a before and an otherwise; it is a disruption of the order of intentional being without rendering it inessential; it is a violence of non-thematization, non-interest, that sacrifices me for the other, a sacrifice imposed not from without but from *within me*, as a "good violence":

⁴³ Ibid., 38, also fn 38, 190.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 49.

The responsibility for another is precisely a saying prior to anything said. The surprising saying which is a responsibility for another is against 'the winds and tides' of being, is an interruption of essence, a disinterestedness imposed with a good violence.⁴⁶

The absence of thematization is thus radical. It even blocks the possibility of measuring the damage done by exposure, of giving an account of the extent to which exposure has disrupted one's projects, one's existence or being. Violence is here incalculable. One does not mourn, or even remember, the egoity disrupted at the origin of saying. All such evaluations depend upon thematization, they are examples of shelters or defenses against the onslaught of responsibility that is precisely what is being surpassed in the exposure of persecution.

Thinking again of Sartre, we have, one could say, a striking asymmetry between two different kinds of decomposure implicit in Levinas' narrative. On the one hand is the violence that negates being as inessential, thus which always inaugurates the retotalization of essence; on the other hand there is the violence of exposure in which one is turned, through the destruction of egoity, towards the alterity of the Other, in the wake of a violence beyond essence. There is neither symmetry nor shared essence between these opposing types of violence; yet that these two faces of violence come together, and must come together, defines the possibility of a collision from which both the saying and the said derive their fundamental ethical expressibility.

Yet the central importance of passivity as the ground for exposure also means that *pain* becomes the guarantor of ethics for Levinas. For it is in pain, not recognition nor action in accordance with principles, that the ethical finds its ultimate expression: "It is only in this way that the for-the-other, the passivity more passive still than any passivity, the emphasis of sense, is kept from being for oneself."⁴⁷ Only pain can hold open the closure of shelter that is always implicit in the said, preventing the totalizing absorption in form and understanding. Pain is in this way an essential aspect of an inner decomposure of the ethical subject—that is, of a decomposure that takes place as a wounded egoity, a disturbed unsettled complacency that cannot limit wounding to its surface, but can only stand as destroyed, even gutted:

The immediacy of the sensible which is not reducible to the gnoseological role assumed by sensation is the exposure to wounding and to enjoyment, an exposure to wounding in enjoyment, which enables the wound to reach the subjectivity of the subject complacent in itself and positing itself for itself [...] The complacency of subjectivity is a complacency experienced for itself, is its very "egoity," its substantiality. But at the same time there is a coring out (*dénudation*) of the imperfect happiness which is the murmur of sensibility. There is a non-coinciding of the ego with itself,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

restlessness, insomnia, beyond what is found again in the present. There is the pain which confounds the ego or in vertigo draws it like an abyss, and prevents it from assuming the other that wounds it in an intentional movement when it posits itself in itself and for itself.⁴⁸

This is, again, what is at the heart of the contrast with thematization, and it rests on a decomposure that remains *unincorporated* in the body of intentional life:

The psyche involved in intentionality does not lie in consciousness of..., its power to thematize, or in the "truth of Being," which is discovered in it through different significations of the said. The psyche is the form of a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity: the same prevented from coinciding with itself, at odds, torn up from the rest, between sleep and insomnia, panting, shivering.⁴⁹

There are thus two kinds of fundamental violence at work in *Otherwise Than Being*, which can be contrasted along the lines of two different modes of decomposition. The first is the violence of beings, of *conatus*, of *inter-esse*, of temporality, of openness, of the said, of existence itself; the second a violence directed against this violence, an interruption of essence that takes the form of a substitution, of the ethical subject as hostage, broken from its own essence that nevertheless remains its own, a break through which the subjectivity of the subject is constituted.⁵⁰ One is the external violence of the interest of essence, of war; the second the internal violence of an ethical resistance that takes the form of a gutted egoity. Subjectivity is accordingly not originally identity; it is already the interruption of identity, or an identity constituted out of the violence of its interruption beyond essence. The subject is first subject only when rendered vulnerable; but vulnerability is already substitution, already a *defeat* of egoity. Vulnerability thus does not come before violence, but after; it is what subjectivity is, as already defeated, already a hostage.⁵¹

This complex of ways in which a primordial violence is implicated in passivity—Levinas's "passivity older than any passivity"—lies at the heart of a series of key terms and metaphors used in *Otherwise Than Being*: expiation for the other, substitution,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁰ "In its *being* subjectivity undoes *essence* by substituting itself for another. Qua for-one-another, it is absorbed in signification, in saying or the verb form of the infinite [...] Substitution is signification. Not a reference from one term to another, as it appears thematized in the said, but substitution as the very subjectivity of the subject, interruption of the irreversible identity of the essence." (Ibid., 13)

⁵¹ "Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, to passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defeating or defeat of the ego's identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation." (Ibid., 15)

obsession, persecution, hostage. Passivity in this way also points to the *inescapability* that is definitive of religiosity for Levinas, and with that of the divine as such. This is an inescapability, not from something before me, something projected by the openness of my being, but something older than my subjectivity, something that lies in the depths of its passivity. The status of hostage, in other words, is ultimately grounded in the *inescapability of God*:

The impossibility of escaping God lies in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity. This passivity is not only the possibility of death in being, the possibility of impossibility. It is an impossibility prior to that possibility, the impossibility of slipping away, absolute susceptibility, gravity without any frivolity. It is the birth of meaning in the obtuseness of being, of a "being able to die" subject to sacrifice.⁵²

Inescapability, impossibility of retreat, no cover or shelter – this is what the "glory of the Infinite" consists in for Levinas: a fullness that is manifest in the inescapability definitive of the condition of being hostage. "The glory of the Infinite is the anarchic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away."⁵³ In this way we can again speak, in Levinas, of a "good" violence, or the violence of the Good: it is the violence implicit in exposed existence itself, in a being that is what it is through the interruption of being called to responsibility; it is a destruction that leaves no fund of reservation, no kind of reserve or recourse. What is divine in responsibility is thus not the purpose or end that requires a response from me, but the leaden violence of its very *assignation*:

I have always been exposed to assignation in responsibility, as though put under a leaden sun without protecting shadows, where every residue of mystery vanishes, every mental reservation through which evasion would be possible.⁵⁴

Does this not come close to giving the name of violence to God? Not at all. It does not *name* God at all, not even negatively through the failure of names – its sole terminus is the responsible subject,

⁵² Ibid., 128.

⁵³ It is worth noting the fuller passage, in which Levinas also deploys a Biblical reference: "The glory of the Infinite is glorified in this responsibility. It leaves to the subject no refuge in its secrecy that would protect its being obsessed by the other, and cover over its evasion. Glory is glorified by the subject's coming out of the dark corners of the "as-for-me", which, like the thickets of Paradise in which Adam hid himself upon hearing the voice of the eternal God traversing the garden from the side from which the day comes, offered a hiding place from the assignation, in which the position of the ego at the beginning, and the very possibility of origin, is shaken. The glory of the Infinite is the anarchic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away." (Ibid., 144)

⁵⁴ Ibid., 145.

the hostage given over to the other.⁵⁵ The divine here is not an open negativity, promising substance; rather, it is the inescapable violence that produces the condition of the hostage, a violence that is not an act of war. The ungraspable is not articulated here in negative terms, or in any terms beyond a trace that apperception cannot grasp: "It is the trace of a relationship with *illeity* that no unity of apperception grasps, ordering one to responsibility. This relationship is religion, excluding the psychology of faith and the loss of faith."⁵⁶

VII. Conclusion: *The Non-Violent Violence of Religion.*

At this point we can perhaps begin to frame at least some of the argument promised at the beginning, namely for the thesis that religion and violence are *co-constitutive*. Drawing from Sartre and Levinas (and also Bataille), passivity is a key theme, in that it underlies both the worldly order of care and the latent potentiality for rending it asunder that is a fundamental characteristic of any violence, including that of tyranny. Yet it is clear that passivity means much more in Levinas than what Bataille had in mind with the theme of animality; and that, likewise, the aspects of violence as refusal, decomposition, legacy, and inescapability have also been thought in Levinas often against the grain of Sartre's exposition. There is much left here to be decided, but perhaps we can at least begin to get a sense of the direction that a fuller argument might take.

The first step might be to argue that the violence of what Levinas calls *substitution* is a violence that would, so to speak, strike at the heart of the possibility of violence. Religion can be constitutive for violence only if it at the same time disrupts its possibility; it cannot stop at the level of mere interpretation without inviting the inevitable indifference of all violence. Religion, in other words, must make such indifference impossible, thus constituting the very sense of violence as "impossible." Yet we must also recognize that substitution does not strike violence by striking at the capacity to be violent in the possession of its specific agents. Religion does not police the world, taking aim at the criminals; it instead always already strikes at everyone: all are guilty for everyone, and I more than the others, to quote Dostoyevsky, as Levinas does.⁵⁷ Religiosity is thus not a counter-violence, a means directed at evil; nor is it something that responds to violence, that seeks to re-establish an order of relations unjustly broken by a violence that would refuse the Good. Religiosity does not even

⁵⁵ "Infinity is beyond the scope of the unity of transcendental apperception, cannot be assembled into a present, and refuses being recollected. This negation of the present and of representation finds its positive form in proximity, responsibility and substitution. This makes it different from the propositions of negative theology. The refusal of presence is converted into my presence as present, that is, as a hostage delivered over as a gift to the other." (*Ibid.*, 151)

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 147; and more: "The subjectivity of the subject is persecution and martyrdom."

take up a determinable relation to the event of violence as such. It is instead a fundamental, and constitutive exposure to the Other, a responsibility-for-the-other; and in this it is neither real, nor concrete. If religiosity is a violence against violence, it is only if it is possible to think of an originary violence, older than passivity, older than all violence, directed not at the concrete acts or legacies of violence, but at putting all in a position of responsibility for all violence, all outrage, all transgression as such.

Yet for all that the violence of religiosity still has to be thought of as a resistance, unreal yet meaningful in its "otherwise." This is only thinkable if we can understand how the face is both the *target* of violence (of murder), and what *resists* violence, without being a counter-force, a counter-violence. In part this might already make sense, given what we have considered above: the face both provokes violence, becomes a target, and resists what it suffers, that being the essence of its suffering, its ethical substance. Yet, as Derrida argues, this works "not by opposing one with another force in the world, but by speaking to me, and by looking at me from the other origin of the world, from that which no finite power can restrict," resulting, again Derrida, in "the strange, unthinkable notion of unreal resistance."⁵⁸ That is, resistance here is not the fruit of some hidden resource of human dignity, some reservoir of nobility and respect or even freedom or right; it is not the force of a claim that will respond to the outrage, but rather a resistance that has no resources at all, but resists only through subjectivity naked and exposed.

In order to capture the trajectory of this idea in Levinas' thinking, Derrida goes on to draw an important contrast between how Levinas expresses it in *Totality and Infinity* with its formulation in an earlier essay, "Freedom and Command." Consider a passage from the 1953 essay:

If the impossibility of killing were a real impossibility, if the alterity of the other were only the resistance of a force, this alterity would be no more exterior to me than that of nature which resists my energies, but which I come to account for by means of reason; it would be no more exterior than the world of perception which, in the final analysis, is constituted by me. The ethical impossibility of killing is a resistance made to me, but a resistance which is not violent, an intelligible resistance.⁵⁹

We can see how, not only in *Totality and Infinity* but even more decisively in *Otherwise Than Being* (perhaps in response to Derrida's powerful essay), Levinas has moved away from this Kantian language (the real in opposition to the intelligible, with respect to origin), precisely by situating the ethical demand before any origin, older than any passivity, evasive even of the a priori (and with that of intelligibility *tout court*). But has this not precisely situated the ethical demand in a zone of violence, though now an unreal, unintelligible violence, otherwise than

⁵⁸ J. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in: *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 103.

⁵⁹ E. Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 22.

even the strategy of mute stupidity practiced by Sartre's decomposed (violent) subject? Precisely because such resistance is neither *real* nor *intelligible*, nor even grounded in what makes the real real, and the intelligible intelligible? A strange, unthinkable notion indeed.

The difficulty lies in the fact that the promise of nonviolence at the core of religiosity has, in Levinas' thinking by the time of *Otherwise Than Being*, no determinate manner of being set against violence, even as a re-embodiment of egoity through trauma into the impossibility of violence. Does this yield a conception of pure nonviolence? Or on the contrary one of a pure violence? Derrida again:

Like pure violence, pure nonviolence is a contradictory concept [...] Pure violence, a relationship between beings without a face, is not yet violence, is pure nonviolence. And inversely, pure nonviolence, the nonrelation of the same to the other (in the sense understood by Levinas), is pure violence. Only a face can arrest violence, but it can do so, in the first place, only because a face can provoke it. Levinas says it well: "violence can only aim at the face.⁶⁰

Perhaps one could argue that, at least in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas avoids both the figure of a pure nonviolence as well as a pure violence with what amounts to a description of a non-violent violence, of a violence directed against violence. The face is not only what arrests violence because it provokes it, but is already the site of the violence of the condition of the subject as hostage; the face can arrest the violence it provokes only thanks to the violence of an originary anarchy that substitutes, expiates the one for the Other.

This has been the underlying interpretive aim of the reading of Levinas' text above. We have sought to understand the anarchy of the origin of a non-violent violence, of the relation to the other as responsibility, in terms of an extension of Sartre's description of the phenomenal decomposition of violence and its paradoxical extension into the phenomenon of order. On one level, this seems to make perfect sense. The anarchy of the face, expressed in the resistance of the face to phenomenality, likewise in the non-derivability of saying, is comparable to Sartre's figure of the decomposed posture of the violent subject in confrontation with the order of intentional life. But for all that, what we might call "ethical decomposure" is not a refusal that would occur on the plane of the real. The saying does not refuse its emission into the said; instead it takes the positive form of a trace in the said, likewise of the expiation of the other. Decomposition here points to the infinite, to the anarchy of saying, without refusing to be born into and as the said, as the totality or world. One might argue that, in the case of religiosity, we have an anarchic decomposure that is more like a constant being-born without the consummation of birth; and that it is, in this sense, infinite. The whole opposition between the saying and the said pursued in Levinas' text is

⁶⁰ J. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 183.

enacted through the description of an anarchy that remains fundamentally decomposed, even in the movement of its composure. This is a kind of decomposition, a kind of violence, which in effect leaves everything standing, all the while remaining fundamentally, inwardly out of reach. As a hostage, I am torn apart by something that leaves my world wholly intact, that does not need to say “no” to me in order to destroy me, but that remains completely innocent of destruction, or of the pain it nevertheless makes possible, even necessary.

In more general terms, we might think of this anarchy in terms of a fundamental non-coincidence of *life* and *world*. And here perhaps we have stumbled upon the real common ground between religion and violence. Religion and violence both have a common root, a common horizon, in the awareness of the fragility of things, of the potential for the world to be torn asunder, to be refused, disrupted, and brought to an end; but equally of how a life can be lost, extinguished, and suppressed. Violence and religion both emerge in the borderlands between a finite world and a threatened life, in such a way that both remain inseparable: violence can never emerge free from the religiosity that binds the violent to a fundamental anarchic responsibility; yet nor is religion possible without the violence of this anarchy. But at the same time, religion and violence do not inhabit the same plane. Violence, in its full indifference, is always possible in the “real world”; its impossibility is not a real impossibility, as if the ethical could be a power among powers, a being among beings. Religious violence does not belong to any rhythm of force and opposition, of violence and counter-violence that grounds the rhythms of totality, of war. Religiosity is instead only the incontrovertible proof that violence is more than a mere play of forces, that it is instead the site of suffering, of pain, and of the meaning of responsibility. Religion, in other words, is the ground for the impossibility of an indifference to violence, and in this way is constitutive of its very sense; it resists, not as force, but only as sacrifice.

This common heritage in the non-coincidence of the world and life means in turn that religion and violence together illuminate both the possibility of tyranny—of that constant threat of being undone by means of the latent exposure of animal passivity—and the being of the cultivated life of care. In the wake of violence constituted in the horizon of religiosity there is always a movement from destruction to recuperation, and the unity of this movement is grasped in what we might call the *pathos of fragility*. What separates the violence of religion from violence as such is ultimately perhaps the possibility of a recuperation that recovers on a different footing, so to speak, one that is specifically ethical, but an ethics that has its ultimate root in this pathos of fragility. But such a recuperation on ethical footing is perhaps just what *justice* means for Levinas.

So, in a sense, we have come full circle back to what had been excluded at the outset—if not to *justification*, then at least to *justice*.