

The Violence of Being. The Holocaust in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Pollefeyt, Didier

The Violence of Being. The Holocaust in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Problemos, vol. Suppl., 2022

Vilniaus Universitetas, Lituania

Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=694574425007>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.Priedas.22.7>




Esta obra está bajo una Licencia Creative Commons Atribución 4.0 Internacional.

The Violence of Being. The Holocaust in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Būties prievarta. Holokaustas E. Levino filosofijoje

Didier Pollefeyt didier.pollefeyt@kuleuven.be

Vilnius University, Lithuania

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6746-0712>

Abstract: This contribution shows how the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has been confronted autobiographically with National-Socialism (1933-1945) and how his personal experience and the experience of the Jewish people under Hitlerism were translated in his philosophical understanding of 'being' as '*il y a*' (in English: 'there is'). The Holocaust provides a unique negative point of entry to understand Levinas' ontological category which is as such not understandable since in the *il y a*, there is no longer a subject that stands before the objectivity of reality. On the contrary, the *il y a* is exactly the category that expresses a situation where the subject itself has no longer the 'right' to exist as such but still does not stop to exist. This violence of being is exactly what Hitlerism wanted to do in creating the Holocaust and submitting the Jewish people to it. This makes understandable how the whole philosophy of Levinas is an effort to overcome the *il y a* through a moral answer to the Holocaust.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, ethics, Judaism, Holocaust, God.

Summary: Straipsnyje parodoma, kaip žydų filosofas Emmanuelis Levinas autobiografiškai susidūrė su nacionalsocializmu (1933–1945) ir kaip jo asmeninė patirtis bei žydų tautos patirtis hitlerizmo laikais atsispindėjo jo filosofiniame „būties“ kaip *il y a* (liet. „tai yra“) supratime. Holokaustas suteikia unikalią negatyvų atspirties tašką, leidžiantį suprasti Levino ontologinę kategoriją, kuri pati savaime nėra suprantama, nes *il y a* nebėra subjekto, stovinčio prieš tikrovės objektyvumą. Priešingai, *il y a* yra būtent ta kategorija, kuri išreiškia situaciją, kai pats subjektas nebeturi „teisės“ egzistuoti kaip toks, bet vis tiek nenustoją egzistuoti. Būtent tokio būties smurto siekė hitlerizmas, sukurdamas Holokaustą ir pajungdamas jam žydų tautą. Dėl to tampa suprantama, kaip visa Levino filosofija yra pastangos įveikti *il y a* per moralinį atsaką į Holokaustą.

Keywords: Emmanuelis Levinas, etika, judaizmas, Holokaustas, Dievas.

Introduction

Generally, the (ethical) concept of God in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is immediately deduced from the idea of 'the face of the other.' God comes to my mind there, where the other addresses me in all his or her fragility as an ethical appeal to be respected in his or her irreducible alterity. Nonetheless, this concept of God does not fall from heaven within the philosophy of Levinas, but it gradually takes shape within the dynamics of his thinking.

In this contribution, we want to look for the existential presuppositions (in French: *les expériences préphilosophiques*) that started the movement of thought of Levinas. After all, philosophy does not

Problemos, vol. Suppl., 2022

Vilniaus Universitetas, Lithuania

Recepción: 24 Noviembre 2021

Aprobación: 20 Diciembre 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.Priedas.22.7>

Redalyc: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=694574425007>

happen in a vacuum but in and from dialogue with life. When we search for the vivid, pre-philosophical presuppositions of Levinas' thinking, we naturally arrive at the traumatic experience that he, personally, and as a member of the Jewish people, was a part of: the Holocaust in the middle of the twentieth century and the untold horror that word evokes (Plant 2019: 3).

In this article, we would like to highlight the *il y a*-tic dimension of the Holocaust. The *il y a* is the Levinasian category of being that seems to us grafted onto the experience of the Holocaust. The main goal of this contribution is to make clear how all the later work of Levinas cannot be understood without this primordial category in his thinking: the *il y a*. It can make understandable how Levinas' philosophy is a thinking that attempts to find a liberating way out of the fundamental 'fascism' of being and that understands God as 'Otherwise-then-Being' (Levinas 1974) who breaks open the anonymity of the *il y a* through the victims of the Holocaust (Hatley 2000); and broader, through every 'useless suffering' (Levinas 1988).

1. The Holocaust in the Life of Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906 in Lithuania ¹. He grew up in a religious, Zionist-minded, middle-class family. His education is situated within the tradition of urban Judaism which, unlike Hasidism (a more rural form of Judaism), does not address God directly but meets God through the serious devotion to the Torah and Talmud. That is why he learned to read the Torah in Hebrew as early as six years of age. Both ghettos and pogroms were unknown to him.

When he was eight years old, World War I began. His family left Lithuania to emigrate to Kharkov in Ukraine. Here, as a child, he experienced the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1920, fearful of communism, his family left Kharkov to resettle in Lithuania that had become independent in 1918. This closed an era in his life that will always carry a Messianic halo for him.

In 1923, he went to study in France. In Strasbourg, Levinas started philosophical studies, which he completed with a doctoral thesis on Husserl in 1930. He obtained the French nationality, married, and completed his military service in 1932. Subsequently, he joined the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* in Paris which advocated for the emancipation of Jews in those countries where they did not yet enjoy civil rights. In this way, he constantly came into contact with the social and political problems that Jews were already facing before the war. In this vein, he wrote one of his first articles, *De l'évasion*, in 1935, in which he described the state of the time. The incessant despair, fatigue, and inescapable fate that emerged from the Germany of Leibniz and Kant, and Goethe and Hegel, are central. The threat of a world catastrophe is clearly perceptible in this work (Poirie 1987: 130).

In 1939, when Nazism started a world war, Levinas was mobilized as a soldier in the French army. During the war, Levinas served his country as

an interpreter of Russian and German (Eaglestone 2019: 2-3). Upon the withdrawal of the 10th army, he was captured near Rennes (1940). After several months of internment in France, he was transported to Hanover, Germany. Here he was assigned to a special command with other Jews. Separated from the other French soldiers, he was ordered to work in a forest under the supervision of the *Wehrmacht* (the armed forces of Nazi Germany) ². Although racial discrimination existed in the camp, he enjoyed special conditions arising from the provisions of the Geneva Convention that protect prisoners of war. During his imprisonment he read a lot, including works from Hegel, Proust, Rousseau, and Diderot.

In the camp, he came into contact with Christian charity in the figure of the camp chaplain, father Pierre ³. Whilst in captivity, Levinas began writing his first work, *De l'existence à l'existant*. He finished it after liberation. Meanwhile, the fate of European Jews was unfolding, but news of the extermination seeps into Hanover slowly: a family member disappears, a family no longer answers. Levinas' wife and daughter will finally survive the war thanks to a monastery in France, near Orléans (Poirie 1987: 130). His mother-in-law was deported and never came back from the camps, while his father and brothers were killed in Lithuania by the SS.

2. The Holocaust as a Foundational Paradigm of the *il y a*

In the midst of the war, Levinas worked on one of his first texts, *De l'existence à l'existant*, which he completed shortly after the war. In this work, he developed a basic category that will form a key to understanding his thinking on the Holocaust: the *il y a*. The *il y a*, or being without being, is the original situation of doom that threatens to overwhelm every concrete being with its anonymous, absorbing presence (Levinas 1986: 17). It is precisely this threatening, formless being without being that awakens in an individual a liberation dynamic, an unstoppable desire for a way out of this fundamental calamity.

The *il y a* is the presence of a presence (Levinas 1986: 18-21). There is not this and there is not that, but there is also not nothing (Levinas & Nemo 1982: 45-51). It is about pure and brutal being with its inhuman neutrality. This *il y a* can never be experienced directly because there is not a subject opposed to an object, there is only the diffuse, all-encompassing, and overwhelming anonymous being. Only through a mental extrapolation can we provide oneself an existential access route to this boundary concept.

The experience of war now is – precisely because it is the concrete *Sitz im Leben* (in English: *place in origin*) of this notion – an appropriate avenue of access for understanding the *il y a*. During World War II, Levinas himself experienced the threat of the regression to being without question ⁴. In the words of Levinas:

In war reality rends the words and images that dissimulate it, to obtrude in its nudity and in its harshness. Harsh reality (this sounds like a pleonasm!), harsh

object-lesson, at the very moment of its fulguration when the drappings of illusion burn war is produced as the pure experience of pure being. (Levinas 1979a: 21)

The Jewish people, under Hitlerism, were exposed to this *il y a* in the most pronounced way. This happens already before and along the establishment of the extermination camps. Jews were taken out of their houses, randomly executed on the streets. This is illustrated by many black and white pictures from this period in the history of the Third Reich. They show Jewish man, woman and even children killed in public areas, still with their daily clothes on, chaotically left behind on the pavers, with local citizens looking with aversion, curiosity and even glee. The ghettos created a new world on the way to the *il y a*: a world disconnected from the outer world, with no resources, no possibility to escape, a world where Jews were delivered to pure survival, in which Jewish life had no value anymore. In the ghettos, there is no relief, no future, but where you still had to exist. The activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* were perhaps the most horrific pre-camp expression of this delivery of the Jewish people to the *il y a* or 'being-without-being'. Being taken out of the warmth of their houses, their beds, the care of their children, the love of their parents, sick and healthy, old and young, flew together like cattle, quickly and nervous, brought together in the anonymity of fields and forests, executed on the spot. This is the horror of the *il y a*, of not being someone anymore. Digging your own grave: it is like opening the *il y a* for yourself. Executed bodies, all put together, still warm, some even not dead, buried in one tomb, dead or alive. This is an illustration of the *il y a*, existence where you can no longer be a human person, where the ethical encounter is suffocated, human beings underway to non-being, merciless, without hope for redemption, submitted to the violence of being. However, the most explicit place where the *il y a* overwhelmed the Jewish people and other victims were the extermination camps. Here, almost literary, everything was dissolved into nothingness. Striking are the (frequent) testimonies of the transport of the Jews to the camps. They include a very existential description of what Levinas means by the *il y a*. In freight cars, people were packed together by sixty to seventy at one time. For days they were shaken aimlessly, the destination unknown to them. They were plunged into utter darkness where no one recognized anyone yet. With no lights, no plumbing. Only the sweltering heat of being with and through each other, without ventilation or food. Children crying because their mother is becoming hysterical, young people copulating with each other, not bothering anyone anymore, elderly people dying without anyone looking after them. There is only the dark chaos where one is no longer a person but still does not (yet) cease to exist⁵.

Arriving at the camp, individuals are stripped of all that makes them persons, and they lapse into a state even lower than that of things (Patterson 2018: 127). Here began a life of total "de-subjectification"⁶, and total decay into gray uniformity: shaved, bare, disinfected, reduced to numbers without a name. This is the very meaning of the *il y a*: everything is dissolved and loses its personal contours (Morrison 2013: 38-39). In this sense we can rightly speak of the *il y a*-tic dimension of

the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, a mode of '(not) being human' never before seen in history emerges. In the chaos of the Shoah, Hitlerism creates the *Muselmänner*. In the analysis of Agamben, the *Muselman* is "not only or not so much a limit between life and death; rather, he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman" (Agamben 2002: 55). The historian Poliakov describes how victims reached this stage after two months in the camps:

When they were still walking, they did it like automatons, once stopped they were no longer capable of any other movement. They fell to the ground, exhausted, everything was equal to them. Their bodies were blocking the way, they could be walked on, they did not move their arms or legs an inch; no protest, no cry of pain came out of their half-open mouths. And yet, they were still alive. The Kapos, the SS could even beat them, push them, they did not move, they had become insensitive to everything. They were beings without thought, without reaction, one could say without soul. (Poliakov 1985: 249, translation – D. P.)⁷

In summary, the *Muselmänner* is an individual on the way back from the *il y a*. All alike, being, but without thought, without reaction, without soul, inescapably at the mercy of dreary anonymity and brutality. Victims became 'living dead', walking corpses whose only mission was to die on command (Patterson 2018: 53-57).

What is the 'ultimate' sense of belonging to human species? And does such a sense exist? For many, the *Muselman* seems to constitute nothing other than an answer to this question. (Agamben 2002: 55)

In the words of Poliakov:

Impossible to get their names out of their mouths, let alone their dates of birth. Even gentleness was not powerful enough to make them talk. They only looked at you with expressionless eyes. (...) You could only smell a poisonous breath as if it was coming out of already decaying entrails. (Poliakov 1985: 255, translation – D. P.)⁸

Elie Wiesel recounts his Holocaust experience in a book with the telling title, *Night* (Wiesel 2006: 86, 106-113). Indeed, the Holocaust is the experience of darkness par excellence. Light means orientation. In the night, however, everything dissolves into nothingness. In the night, everything is equalized, everything sinks into namelessness. There is only the brutal, inescapable experience of 'being there'. Who has experienced that being more than a mother with her baby standing naked in the snow waiting to be shot?

Thus, the *il y a* is the oppressive fullness of being that swallows up an individual and makes him or her nothing, leaving them to total abandonment (Morrison 2013: 38-39). All distinctions fall away between men and women, adults and children, scholars and illiterates, families and households, and between life and death. Everything is placed under one umbrella. One is already dead when one enters the camp:

"Over there. Do you see the chimney over there? Do you see it? And the flames, do you see them?" (Yes, we saw the flames.) "Over there, that's where they will take you. Over there will be your grave. You still don't understand? You sons of

bitches. Don't you understand anything? You will be burned! Burned to a cinder! Turned into ashes!" (Wiesel 2006: 30-31)

There is no more death, because there is no life (Morrison 2013: 38-39). To be *Muselmänner* is 'to simmer' in the *ilya* (Agamben 2002: 57). To be consumed by the absolute desolation of being is always the numbing same, without workdays nor holidays, without yesterday or tomorrow. There is only the desperate, scrambling now from which there is no escape. Even the most basic act of dying loses its personal character: there is no life and there is no death (Agamben 2002: 239; Plant 2014: 44-79). It is the total loss of power over one's own autonomy. It is the total surrender to the nothingness of being, without being able to defend oneself anymore.

Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one Image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen. (Levi 1982, cited in Agamben 2002: 44)

Likewise, the very act of suicide loses its significance as the ultimate act of freedom. When man is absorbed by being, he can no longer take his own life. After all, suicide presupposes a meaningful subject. It is as if Hitlerism understood this when it had signs installed in the camps with the following message: "Jews who wish to hang themselves are requested to put a name card in their mouth to facilitate identification." In such a way, Nazism delivered man to a fatal immortality.

Martyrdom also became virtually impossible in Auschwitz. According to Poliakov, very human act lost its meaning:

This value of example, this crystallizing virtue that it possesses in human communities, was reduced to nothing in the camps. A Gandhi would have become the object of general ridicule. It is the generalized passivity of the prisoners that is most striking. (...) This obedience reached a real automation. (Poliakov 1985: 252-253) ⁹

This is *Endlösung* (in English: Final Solution) in the strictest sense of the word: everything loses its identity and is dissolved into the nothingness of being (Patterson 2018: 45). It is Holocaust in the etymological sense of the word: total annihilation by the (all-consuming) fire. Nazism is also called an anarchist totalitarianism. Auschwitz is an anarchic system: that is, when one enters, no one or nothing is the beginning (*arche*) or end, everything floats around, drowning in total disorientation. Totalitarian means an individual loses all that is personal to him or her in order to be submitted to the totality of being without name.

For Levinas, then, the Holocaust is unique in the strictest sense of the word:

Among the millions of human beings who encountered misery and death, the Jews alone experienced a total dereliction. They experienced a condition inferior to that of things, an experience of total passivity, an experience of Passion. (Levinas 1990: 11-12)

To differentiate between different forms of human suffering is certainly not allowed. But Claudel cannot look away from a suffering that is experienced as the abandonment of everything and everyone, a suffering at the limit of all suffering, a suffering that suffers all sufferings. That is no doubt what he is referring to when, without being flippant or guilty of trotting out a tired cliché, he uses the term 'holocaust'. (Levinas 1990: 129-130)

Levinas attacks, in rather sharp terms, the young socialist who, in the fervor of his trade union activities, dares to compare the situation in the Renault factories with the situation in Auschwitz (Levinas 1976: 286-287).

The consequence of this total de-subjectification is for Levinas 'horror' (in French: *horreur*) (Morrison 2013: 38-39). Being weighs on you like fatal despair. As a human being, you disappear as an exponent of an anonymous event where you can no longer be human (Katz 2013). Nazism is a diabolical power that engulfs everything. In 1934, Levinas wrote an article titled, *La philosophie de l'hitlerisme* (Levinas 1934: 199-208). One will not find it in his own bibliography because Levinas later distanced himself from (the title of) this article. After all, how can one call Nazism a system, or a philosophy? On the contrary, the diabolical reverses every system into its opposite. Therefore, for Levinas, Hitlerism is the anti-system, the anti-state *par excellence*, an *Unwelt* (a non-world), an *Ungrund* (McLachlan 2016) where all things and people are perverted into being without more ¹⁰.

Being, for Levinas, is fundamental mischief. It is the unruly, hostile, faceless matter (Sealey 2013). In the Holocaust, we also see this ever-present, inescapable being reflected in the materiality of the dead. Who is not familiar with the heavenly images of heaps of corpses: women, children, and the elderly, a shapeless accumulation of arms, legs, and heads? Throughout the crime of Auschwitz, the *il y a* returned irreversibly in this shapeless but material specter.

With this approach to being, Levinas' philosophy clearly stands in reaction against Heidegger's thinking (Moyn 1998; Fagenblat 2019). For Heidegger, 'light' is being. However, Levinas fought against the depersonalizing forces of nature during his punishment camp in the forest. He did not become a nature lover, but a city person. Nature, after all, is also formless wriggling and rock-hard *struggle for life*. Insofar as there is a (philosophical) affinity between Heidegger and Nazism, it must be sought in his anti-Levinasian conception of being. If being as primordial ground gives itself as a grace in nature, then we are not far from condoning the way in which being 'gives itself' in the historical form of fascist blood and soil theory (Levinas 1989: 123-124). For Levinas himself, however, Heidegger remains one of the greatest philosophers in history, and his

relation to National Socialism is a catastrophe that does not explain his philosophy. Far more painful than his philosophy, for Levinas, is the fact that in his spiritual testament, Heidegger does not say a word about the Holocaust.¹¹

Conclusion

The starting point of Levinas' thinking is thus not 'God' or 'the face', but the experience of the radical negation of the face in which God speaks. War is the most eminent expression and experience of the *il y a*. The *il y a* is the most primordial category in Levinas' philosophy. It will come back in his later thinking. In *Totality and Infinity* it is present as the shadow side of the 'elemental' (Levinas 1968: 149-151), and in his Talmudic readings (Levinas 1994), the *il y a* explains Levinas' dislike of all sacred deities. In the enthusiasm of religious ecstasy, the subject is destroyed, and they find themselves in the grip of the divine, a (non-biblical) anonymous power ('the Sacred') and not 'opposite' ('the Saint'). In relation to this *il y a*-tic divineness, Levinas' position is nothing more than atheism.

The question then in Levinas's philosophy becomes: how does one escape the *il y a* that continuously threatens human existence. Even before World War II, in 1935, Levinas had raised the question of *De l'évasion*: how to escape the imminent premonition of *les angoisses de la guerre qui approchait* (in English: the anguishes of the approaching war) (Poirie 1987: 82). However, with the *de facto* apocalyptic revolution of nihilism in the following years (1939-1945), the question becomes even more stringent. For Levinas, the answer will only be found in the opposite of the *il y a*, not in destructive 'sameness' but in 'otherness'; in the experience of the Other who appears in the *il y a* in its absolute vulnerability and as a place where God as the Total Other "comes to mind" (Levinas 1998). Saving the Other from the destructive powers of the *il y a* will become the first commandment, that we should even love more than Godself (Levinas 1979b). Even the concept of the Messiah will be redefined later by Levinas in the light of the *il y a*. The Messiah is not so much a figure that will for sure save all people: 'I' become the Messiah for the Other when he or she risks to be overwhelmed and destroyed by the *il y a*-tic powers of reality (Bergo 2009).

Acknowledgments

This research is part of the project "Modernity and Holocaust in Lithuania: philosophical analysis of moral dilemmas" (Vilnius University). This project has received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT), agreement No S-MOD-21-8.

References

- Agamben, G., 2002. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York, the United States: Zone Books.
- Bergo, B., 2009. Levinas' Weak Messianism in Time and Flesh, or the Insistence of Messiah Ben David. In: *Journal of Cultural Research* 13(3-4): 225-248.
- Eagleton, R., 2019. Levinas and the Holocaust. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Morgan, M., Oxford, the United Kingdom: University Press.
- Fagenblat, M., 2019. Levinas and Heidegger: The Elemental Confrontation. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Morgan, M. Oxford, United Kingdom: University Press.
- Hatley, J. D., 2000. *Suffering Witness. The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable*. Albany (New York): the United States: Suny Press.
- Katz, C. E., 2013. *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Levi, P., 1982. *Survival in Auschwitz and the Reawakening: Two Memoires*. Translated by Woolf, S., New York, the United States: Summit Books.
- Levinas, E., 1934. Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme. In : *Esprit* 3(26): 199-208.
- Levinas, E., 1968. *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*. The Hague, the Netherlands: Nijhoff.
- Levinas, E., 1974. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Phaenomenologica 54), La Haye, the Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Levinas, E. 1979a. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*. Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Texts, Volume 1. Translated by A Lingis, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Levinas, E., 1979b. *To Love the Torah More Than God*. In *Judaism* 28(2): 216-223.
- Levinas, E., Nemo, F., 1982. *Ethique et infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*. Paris, France: Fayard.
- Levinas, E., 1986. *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris, France: Vrin.
- Levinas, E., 1988. Useless Suffering. In: *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. R. Bernasconi & D. Wood, London: United Kingdom: Routledge, pp. 156-167.
- Levinas, E., 1989, Is Ontology Fundamental? In: *Philosophy Today* 33(2): 121-129.
- Levinas, E., 1990. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Translated by S. Hand, S. Baltimore, United States: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levinas, E., 1994. *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*. Translated by G. D. Mole. Bloomington, the United States: Indiana University Press.
- Levinas, E., 1998. *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Translated by B. Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- McLachlan, J., 2016. The *il y a* and the Ungrund: Levinas and the Russian Existentialists Berdyaev and Shestov. In: *Levinas Studies* 11: 213-235.
- Morrison, G. J., 2013. *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*. Pittsburgh, United States: Duquesne University Press.
- Moyn, S., 1998. Judaism against Paganism. Emmanuel Levinas' Response to Heidegger and Nazism in the 1930s. In: *History and Memory* 10(1): 25-58.

- Patterson, D., 2018. *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence*. New York, the United States: Suny Press.
- Peperzak, A., 1993. *To the Other. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, West Lafayette, IN, the United States: Purdue University Press.
- Plant, R., 2019. Levinas, Philosophy, and Biography. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Morgan, M. Oxford, United Kingdom: University Press.
- Plant, R., 2014. Levinas and the Holocaust: A Reconstruction. In: *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 22(1): 44-79.
- Poirie, F., 1987. *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?* Lyon, France: La Manufacture.
- Poliakov, L., 1985. *Breviaire de la haine: Le IIIe Reich et les Juifs*. Paris, France: Calmann-Lévy.
- Sealey, K., 2013. The 'Face' of the *il y a*: Levinas and Blanchot on Impersonal Existence. In: *Continental Philosophy Review* 46(3): 431-448.
- Wiesel, E., 2006. *Night*. Translated by Wiesel, M. New York, United States: Hill and Wang.

Notes

- 1 For the biographical outline, we primarily draw from Poirie's interview with Levinas (Poirie 1987).
- 2 In *Difficult Liberty*, Levinas writes: "There were seventy of us in a forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany. An extraordinary coincidence was the fact that the camp bore the number 1492, the year of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain under the Catholic Ferdinand V. The French uniform still protected us from Hitlerian violence. But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us or gave us work or orders or even a smile – and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes – stripped us of our human skin" (see Levinas 1990: 152-153).
- 3 For Levinas, this was a very important experience in shaping his attitude towards Christianity. According to Levinas, Auschwitz offered opportunities for a new encounter between Judaism and Christianity. Throughout his work, he regularly mentions the Christian *caritas* that revealed itself during the Holocaust. In English: "In the face of this torture, in the face of this misery, in the face of this abyss of Hitlerism, the Church showed understanding directly to the Jewish population. In my opinion, a new period in Jewish-Christian relations is beginning." In French: «Il y a eu dans l'Eglise devant cette torture, devant cette misère, devant cet abîme de l'hitlérisme, une compréhension, témoignée directement à la population juive. La commence, à mon avis, une nouvelle période dans les relations judéo-chrétiennes» (Levinas, quoted in Poirie 1987: 121). Levinas further refers to what Franz Rosenzweig said in this context.
- 4 In the appendix of *Difficult Liberty* (Signature), Levinas explicitly establishes the connection between the war experience and the *il y a*: None of the generosity which the German term '*es gibt*' is said to contain, revealed itself between 1933 and 1945. This must be said!" (Levinas 1990: 292). With the *es Gibt*, Levinas refers to the Heideggerian concept of being. Although *es Gibt* and *il y a* are corresponding terms, they are completely different philosophically.
- 5 See Elie Wiesel's description (Wiesel 1986: 29).
- 6 Regarding his own camp experience, Levinas writes: "A small inner murmur, the strength and wretchedness of persecuted people, reminded us of our essence as thinking creatures, but we were no longer part of the world. (...)"

- We were beings entrapped in their species; despite all their vocabulary, beings without language” (Levinas 1990: 153).
- 7 In French: «Le détenu parvenait le plus souvent à cette étape, caractérisée par un incroyable amaigrissement et une véritable hébétude mentale, après deux mois de séjour au camp. Quand ils marchaient encore, ils le faisaient comme des automates, une fois arrêtés ils n’étaient plus capables d’aucun autre mouvement. Ils tombaient par terre, exténues, tout leur était égal. Leurs corps bouchaient le passage, on pouvait marcher sur eux, ils ne retiraient pas d’un centimètre leurs bras ou leurs jambes; aucune protestation, aucun cri de douleur ne sortait de leurs bouches entr’ouvertes. Et pourtant, ils étaient encore vivants. Les kapos, les S.S. même pouvaient les battre, les pousser, ils ne bougeaient pas, ils étaient devenus insensibles à tout. C’étaient des êtres sans pensée, sans réaction, on aurait dit sans âme».
 - 8 In French: « Impossible de sortir de leur bouche leur nom, encore moins leur date de naissance. La douceur même n’était pas assez puissante pour les faire parler. Ils vous regardaient seulement d’un regard sans expression. (...) Vous ne sentiez qu’une haleine empoisonnée comme si elle sortait d’entrailles déjà en décomposition ».
 - 9 In French: « Cette valeur de l’exemple, cette vertu cristallisatrice qu’il possède dans les collectivités humaines, se trouvaient dans les camps réduits à néant. Une Gandhi y serait devenue l’objet de la risée générale. C’est la passivité généralisée des détenus qui frappe surtout. (...) Cette obéissance atteignait une véritable automatisation ».
 - 10 “The very title of Levinas’ article, “Some reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” which appeared in *Esprit* in early 1934, suggests that for its author the issue of coming to terms with National Socialism had special, metaphysical stakes. In later years, Levinas excluded these reflections from his list of publications, regretting an attribution of philosophical status to his subject that conferred on it a dignity he did not think it deserved (A. Peperzak, 1993, 3)” (Moyn 1998: 35-36).
 - 11 According to Levinas, much of the data that Farias provides regarding Heidegger’s relationship to Nazism has been known for a long time. For Levinas, it is much worse that Heidegger does not mention Nazism in his interview with Spiegel. For Levinas, this is far worse than joining Nazism during its prime. Indeed, such participation often results from opportunism and latent threats (see Levinas 1987: 11-20; Levinas 1988 : 82-83; Poirie 1987: 49; Fagenblat 2019 : 9-11).