

## Ivan's Rebellion: Love and the Excess of Evil

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When distilling Emmanuel Levinas' startling ethical trajectory, commentators often point to Levinas' penchant for Alyosha Karamazov's characterization of ethical responsibility in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov*: "We are all guilty for everything and everyone, and I more than all the others."<sup>i</sup> Yet when turning to his explicit consideration of the excess of evil and the problem of theodicy, Levinas' work<sup>ii</sup> in many ways echoes the thought of a more unlikely character in Dostoevsky's novel.

Scholarship has emphasized the provocation of the Holocaust and the so-called theological problem of evil in Levinas' thought.<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, Levinas, who spent years in a Nazi prisoner of war camp, and who lost family members at Auschwitz, himself claimed that the "presentment and memory of the Nazi horror"<sup>iv</sup> dominated his experience so that if "there is an explicitly Jewish moment in my thought, it is the reference to Auschwitz."<sup>v</sup>

In an age indelibly marked "after Auschwitz," Levinas developed a notion of evil as "excessive" and his insistence of the "transcendence" of evil introduces debilitating difficulties for any ethical response to the moral lacunae opened up by Auschwitz. "The essential problem is: Can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?"<sup>vi</sup> Levinas' ethical consideration of the disaster of the twentieth century centers on challenging the abiding claim, fundamental to theodical reasoning, that suffering is ultimately "for the best." Levinas challenges theodical reasoning that insists evil will be redeemed ultimately and *even now* through ethical duties motivated anticipatorily by such a happy end: "Consequently, what remains? Either this means that there is no reason for morality and hence it can be concluded that everyone should act like the Nazis, or the moral law maintains its authority. . . . Before the twentieth century, all religion begins with the promise. It begins with the 'Happy End'. It is the promise of heaven. Well then, doesn't a phenomenon like Auschwitz invite you, on the contrary, to think the moral law independently of the Happy End? That is the question."<sup>vii</sup>

Dostoevsky's character, Ivan Karamazov, in the chapter titled "Rebellion" of *The Brother's Karamazov*, also expounded a biting criticism of theodicy. Ivan sought to render the problem of evil insoluble by denying the existence of an absolute moral command, denying as Levinas did, a "happy end." A "happy end" or "future harmony," for Levinas and Ivan, is precisely what is called into question by absurdity of irredeemable suffering. Ethical reasoning is therefore "pulled to its ruin"<sup>viii</sup> by theodical reasoning that must cruelly and impossibly justify unjustified suffering in order to have reason to act ethically in the world. Extending Ivan's movement of thought, Levinas, specifically in his essay "Useless Suffering," announces the "end of theodicy," emphasizing the useless and unspeakable evil of the twentieth century epitomized in Auschwitz. In fact, a number of common themes emerge when holding together the thought of Levinas and Ivan on evil: the "intentionality or

passivity of evil,” the “excess of evil,” the “end of theodicy,” a prizing of the “suffering of the other,” and the “command to respond to evil *as* excessive.”

Yet for all the correlations one can uncover, when considering the character of the ethical response to evil, it would be difficult to imagine any greater difference, ethical nihilism (in the case of Ivan) or radical altruism (in the case of Levinas). So the question arises: how is it that such similar analyses of the enigma of evil’s excess can lead to such radically different responses? Or to forego impartiality, what is wrong Ivan’s argument, that in the face of the senselessness of evil, he can rigorously claim, within the space of his argument, that no ethical response is possible without forsaking the love of humanity that motivates the ethical response—that rebellion and righteous indignation remains solely appropriate? Why doesn’t Ivan do the best he can for those children who suffering unjustifiably?

Due in large measure to the resonance of Ivan’s thought in Levinas’ consideration of evil, Levinas can offer the means of cracking open Ivan’s compelling argument by developing an ethics not grounded in a “happy end.” Let me turn first to Ivan’s diatribe against the justification of evil in “Rebellion” before vexing his thought with the help of Levinas.

### *Ivan’s Love of Children*

When considering Ivan’s argument in “Rebellion,” it is crucial to recognize that the interrogation of evil and the criticism of theodicy begins with the question of how it is possible to love one’s neighbor. In order to simplify and focus his argument, Ivan highlights the love we have for children as a particularly intense form of neighborly love.<sup>ix</sup> For Ivan, we love children unconditionally (dirty, ugly, behaving badly). We love their innocence. Such love is not tied to the conditions of behavior, appearance, or expectation so the suffering of these innocents highlights the absolute senselessness of evil. For if children suffer, we cannot say that they deserve it. We are prevented from easily justifying such suffering in so far as children by nature remain exempt from the standard of good and evil—they have not eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To witness such suffering is to be traumatized by sheer incomprehensible horror. Evil protrudes as senseless.

In this way, Ivan radicalizes the oft-heard complaint, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and instead focuses his analysis on the innocent. (Job’s blameless character can be questioned; his ‘friends’ can reasonably be filled with doubts of Job’s professed righteousness.)<sup>x</sup>

In order that Alyosha (and Dostoevsky’s readers) feel the full weight of his argument, Ivan relays a number of graphic and gruesome acts of cruelty directed against children (culled from Russian newspapers). In just a few pages, Ivan brilliantly and successfully allows the problem of suffering and evil to belligerently protrude into thought in heart-wrenching fashion. “How do we come to terms with such evil particularly in a world God had a hand in making?” “How do we fathom this kind of innocent suffering?” It is simply incomprehensible that such suffering would be allowed or made necessary. Evil is a problem that, in the space of Ivan’s argument, resists solution if we are true to our love of children.

Theodical reason takes on the “problem of evil,” as problem of loss or gain and looks for its resolution in some economy of compensation. Theodicy places evil in an economic structure where suffering will ultimately be compensated, where punishment ultimately brings about justice, or where the evil perpetrated becomes an “investment” in a future prosperity or is simply the “price we pay” for our precious freedom in order that we live in the best possible world. To enter into such an economy, it must be admitted that no act of evil is in principle unjustifiable—it is permissible to torture children.

Ivan rebels against this kind of reasoning. There is for Ivan some evil that must remain unjustifiable, that simply cannot be associated with or exchanged for a compensating good. For Ivan, reconciling ourselves to the useless and unbearable suffering of children is impossible. If theodicy maintains that the greater good is purchased by butchering innocent children, then for Ivan the only way to psychologically admit this cost is the inhumane covering over or forgetting *not the butchery* but the love I have for children in order to make the suffering bearable. When we engage in theodicy we abandon our love of humanity. We must necessarily reject the love we have for innocents who suffer in order to accept the world soaked with tears of unatoned innocent suffering even as this very love is what first motivates theodicy to make sense of the senselessness of innocent suffering.

As Ivan proposes the problem, any theodicy or cosmodicy that would make sense of innocent suffering must cherish a cruelty so intense and morally corrupt that its very task must be seen as impossible.<sup>xi</sup> And if innocent suffering is sensical, purposive for any reason, woven in the fabric of our world, our only ethical response to such an obscene, irredeemable situation is to return your ticket and exit the situation.

“I don’t want harmony. From love of humanity I don’t want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, *even if I were wrong*. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much. And so I give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I give it back as soon as possible.”<sup>xii</sup>

### *Levinasian Resonance*

Ivan’s analysis exposes the way in which evil presses upon us in an excessive and oppressive manner that parallels Levinas’ insistence upon the “transcendence” of evil. Extending Ivan’s analysis, evil is encountered as a phenomenon that exceeds our conceptual grasp and thwarts any attempt to render its appearance sensical. Not simply a statement regarding the unendurable and terrible suffering evil deeds can occasion, Levinas wants to underscore the inability to adequately conceive the magnitude and intensity of evil.<sup>xiii</sup> For each thinker, the attempt to justify evil is not only an inadequate response to this excess but is “scandalous,” “obscene,” “outrageous.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Yet for Ivan and Levinas the “end” of any theodical response to evil, is not simply expressed as a demand for silence in the face of evil’s excess. The *malum* impinges upon Ivan such that he cries out at one point: “I must have justice, or I will destroy myself. And not justice in some remote infinite time and space.”<sup>xv</sup> Likewise for Levinas, although we can never adequately conceive of and therefore respond to the excess of evil, we *nevertheless* are commanded to respond. For each figure then, any

ethical response to evil must be commensurate with evil's excess (and therefore avoid theodicy that pretends to understand evil in terms of an economic exchange). Indeed, Ivan's argument is laid bare by Levinas' statement verging on hyperbole: "For an ethical sensibility, confirming, in the inhumanity of our time, its opposition to this inhumanity, the justification of our neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality."<sup>xvi</sup> Yet, whereas Levinas is propelled by his statement to reimagine responsibility and the character of ethical subjectivity, Ivan, on the other hand, rejects a world where innocents must suffer, where loves are denied, and justice is never at hand.

### *Limitations of Ivan's Argument*

An exploration of this divergence requires that we take a closer at how Ivan sets up his argument—reflecting on the character of his professed love of humanity. According to Ivan, we are unable to love adults except if we are duty-bound to do so. The wretchedness of those most in need of our love, which becomes all too apparent when we get close, drives a wedge between our love and that particular person. "One can love one's neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it's almost impossible" for "as soon as he shows his *face*, love is gone."<sup>xvii</sup> What is more, Ivan finds adults "disgusting and unworthy of love," for he knows them to be implicated in their own suffering. But children, as we have seen, we can love them up close. We love them *in spite* of how ugly they appear, how putrid their breath, how bad their behavior. In so far as they are innocent (that is unaware of good and evil prior to age seven) they are simply lovable.<sup>xviii</sup>

Ivan's argument, then, maintains that we can love children up close *as if at a distance*. We love what they all share. Innocence as the universal characteristic of children allows us to overlook their unlovable singular and particular traits that would otherwise make them more difficult to love. Our love of children is not linked to their corporeal being, subject to suffering and death—their *Leibhaftigkeit* as vulnerable and destitute. Our love for children is in relation to a smiling face, grimy fingernails, or playful disobedience that evince the *category* of innocence. These are the same attributes that become unlovable peculiarities that drive out neighbor love in adults, who are implicated in their bodily annoyances for in bodily decrepitude in adults lurk the vicissitudes of a wretched life. According to Ivan's analysis we love children in so far as they participate in or instantiate the idea of innocence. In fact, for Ivan the vulnerability and defenselessness of children is what brings out the worst in their tormentors. The "child that has no refuge and no appeal, that sets the tormentor's vile blood on fire."<sup>xix</sup>

This is how it must be in order for Ivan's argument to proceed with such brutal honesty leading to such destructive indignation. For only in the face of an irrefragable and disturbingly traumatic exposé of innocent suffering does the issue of justice rise to such perspicacity that it can be argued that any morally upright person must reject the world saturated with the tears of unatoned and *unatonable*, unjustified and *unjustifiable* suffering.<sup>xx</sup> No one ought to imagine that they are able to engage the world so corrupt and evil in an ethical fashion. For Ivan evil must be respected as unjustifiable, incomprehensible, leading to the conclusion of life's absurdity and the breakdown of every sensible ethical system built upon the sacrifice of innocents. We must reject such a world, since there is nothing to be done. Within Ivan's argument, one can not apply oneself ethically to the betterment of the world without a happy end and one can not embrace a happy end without turning one's back on the love of innocents—that is the price we pay to have an ethical system where we can

apply ourselves. Children's unjustifiable suffering calls me to respond and yet we must turn our backs on a love that first demanded the ethical response if that response is to be productive in a world that must make moral sense.

Levinas, on the contrary, states: "I don't very much like the word love, which is worn-out and debased. Let us speak instead of the taking upon oneself the fate of the other."<sup>xxi</sup> For Levinas, ethical responsibility is borne by singularities, the irreducibly unique situations of daily life and not in the study of cases by which particulars fall under universal categories.<sup>xxii</sup> Whereas Ivan exposes unjustifiable evil by focusing on the category of innocence, Levinas encounters the excess of evil in the suffering and vulnerability of the singular other that defies categorization and ruptures formal synthesis.

Ivan's argument is not motivated by the haunting stories of cruelty unleashed on actual *vulnerable* bodies but rather by scandalous attack on the category of *innocence*. Simone Weil states: "Patience consists in not transforming suffering into crime."<sup>xxiii</sup> Ivan's righteous indignation expresses impatience with a world soaked with the tears of innocents and thereby denies the vulnerability of suffering children an ethical force. Approaching patiently "my horror of evil" Levinas maintains, "reveals—or is already—my association with the Good"<sup>xxiv</sup> for the "unjustifiable suffering of the other, opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human" where "the suffering of the other. . . solicits me and calls me."<sup>xxv</sup>

Two insights into the inadequacy of Ivan's argument emerge with the help of Levinas. Ivan's indignation in the face of *innocent* suffering tears him away from the world of interpersonal encounters and allows him to envision his relation to the world as a spectator at a play. But are we "in the world" as a spectator? If he imagined he could not leave, how would that change the scenario? He may ask for forgiveness, instead of asking who can forgive (see final page of "Rebellion"). He would always already be responsible for all those who suffer uselessly, unjustifiably.

Second, Ivan's theory-laden approach to evil successfully exposes evil's excess yet can not entertain an ethical response able to measure that excess opened by his argument. Innocent suffering, in the space of Ivan's argument, unleashes an ethical nihilism.<sup>xxvi</sup> Ivan's rebellion is predicated on an inability to imagine a justice independent of the promise of a higher harmony or a happy end proposed by theodical reasoning. He rebels against a cruel justice as future harmony, in so far as it is future, so that the world as it stands now is unacceptable according to that standard of justice.

Levinas, on the other hand, rethinks the possibility of responsibility "beyond" the "closed dimensions sketched by the judgments of the intellect."<sup>xxvii</sup> In the vulnerability of the other, Levinas uncovers a basis for ethics "after Auschwitz," one capable of "measuring" evil's excess and overcoming an ethical nihilism opened by that excess. It cannot therefore "be concluded that after Auschwitz there is no longer a moral law, as if the moral or ethical law were impossible, without promise."<sup>xxviii</sup> The problem of *innocent* suffering may well require the radical response of "turning back" one's ticket, yet the ethical claim of *vulnerability* for Levinas issues a radical demand as well, one that remains independent of any "higher harmony" or "the Happy End." The excess of evil, its malignancy that resists integration, solicits a transcendence that "shines forth in the face of the other man. . . The [*concreteness of the face, which is ethical from the outset,*] puts into question the sufficiency of my identity as an ego; it binds me to an infinite responsibility with regard to the other. . . . Is it not that

this evil might touch me, as if, from the first, the other man appealed to me, placing into question my *resting upon myself* and my *conatus essendi*. . . . *Does not the Good break through there, in evil*. . . ? A Good that is not pleasant, which commands and proscribes. . . . and implies no other reward than this very elevation of the dignity of the soul; and disobedience implies no punishment if not the rupture itself with the Good. A service indifferent to remuneration! No failure could release me from this responsibility for the suffering of the other man.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Levinas’ ethical response to evil involves a distinctive understanding of the asymmetrical, nonreciprocal responsibility to and for the other, responding directly to their concrete suffering. In the horror of evil I am infinitely responsible to and for the other, whose useless suffering solicits me to suffer for the “suffering of someone else. It is this attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelties of our century (despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties) can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle.”<sup>xxx</sup>

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” in *Entre Nous* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 105 and Kearney, Richard, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 67: “As Alyosha Karamazov says in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky: ‘We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others.’ And he does not mean that every ‘I’ is more responsible than all the other, for that would be to generalize the law for everyone else—to demand as much from the other as I do from myself. This essential asymmetry is the very basis of ethics: not only am I more responsible than the other but I am even responsible for everyone else’s responsibility!” In “The Paradox of Morality” he continues: “I would even ask whether we are not faced with an order that one cannot preach. Does one have the right to preach to the other a piety without reward? That is what I ask myself. It is easier to tell myself to believe without promise than it is to ask it of the other. That is the idea of asymmetry. I can demand of myself that which I cannot demand of the other.” Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainley, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, p. 176.

<sup>ii</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988) and “Transcendence and Evil,” in *The Phenomenology of Man and of the Human Condition* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983).

<sup>iii</sup> See for example Oona Ajzenstat, *Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), and Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2002), chapter 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Signature” in *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 291.

<sup>v</sup> Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainley, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, p. 176.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 20. For Agamben, ethics can not exhaust the problem of the twentieth century, but rather the “very problem was so enormous as to call into question law itself, dragging it to its ruin,” reflecting “the powerlessness of men, who continue to cry ‘may that never happen again!’ when it is clear by that ‘that’ is, by now, everywhere.”

<sup>ix</sup> “I meant to speak of the suffering on mankind generally. But we had better confine ourselves to the suffering of children. That reduces the scope of my argument to a tenth of what it would be” (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 219).

<sup>x</sup> Job also focuses on *his* own suffering. Like Levinas, Ivan sets up the problem in terms of the suffering of others not his own.

<sup>xi</sup> Ivan asks Alyosha, “Imagine you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last. Imagine that you are doing this but that it is essential and inevitable to torture to death

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only one tiny creature . . . in order to found that edifice on it unavenged tears. Would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me. Tell the truth” (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 226).

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> “Evil is not only the non-integratable, it is also the non-integratableness of the non-integratable” (“Transcendence and Evil,” p. 128).

<sup>xiv</sup> “But does not this end of theodicy, which imposes itself in the face of this century’s inordinate trial, at the same time and in a more general way reveal the unjustifiable character of suffering in the other, the outrage it would be for me to justify my neighbors suffering?” (“Useless Suffering,” p. 98).

<sup>xv</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 225.

<sup>xvi</sup> “Useless Suffering,” p. 65-66

<sup>xvii</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 219.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 223.

<sup>xx</sup> Note how Ivan’s rejection of the world is dependent on certain narrowing of options (that Alyosha is unable to catch and so allows them to pass, indirectly granting them legitimacy) both here in the initial stages of the argument and in the spurious choice Ivan must make between a world working toward a higher harmony or the deterministic world of science, that would require Ivan to forsake his love of innocence.

<sup>xxi</sup> “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” in *Entre Nous*, p. 103.

<sup>xxii</sup> “Ethical transcendence is “borne by recourse to a “material datum” of the consciousness, to a “concrete content,” rather than by reflection upon some “formal structure” (“Transcendence and Evil,” p. 133).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1952), p. 124.

<sup>xxiv</sup> “Transcendence and Evil,” p. 131.

<sup>xxv</sup> “Useless Suffering,” p. 94.

<sup>xxvi</sup> “Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 21).

<sup>xxvii</sup> “Transcendence and Evil,” p. 133.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *The Provocation of Levinas*, p. 176.

<sup>xxix</sup> “Transcendence and Evil,” p. 133-34

<sup>xxx</sup> “Useless Suffering,” p. 94.