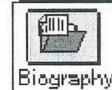


The Trauma of the Holocaust as a Central Challenge of Levinas' Ethical and Theological Thought

Didier Pollefeyt



Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Abstract

We ground our proposition on four Levinasian categories. We understand Levinas' category of being, *il y a*, as inspired by the experience of the holocaust. His thought is comprehended as a search for liberation from 'fascism of being'. We describe *hypostasis* as the (first) human answer to *il y a*. The holocaust teaches Levinas that identity-acquisition can only bring about liberation halfway. We show how only the dedication to the *face of the suffering other* promises real liberation. In this perspective, we can understand the God-idea of Levinas as a critic on the *Gott mit uns* of nazism.

Introduction

As one of the basic insights of postmodernity, human thought about God and the world can no longer be understood as a contingent, arbitrary thought experiment that 'falls from heaven'. Rather, it arises from a lived-through interaction with historical and political realities. In this article, when we inquire into the lively *expériences préphilosophiques* (J. Wahl) in the thought of the great French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas (1906, Lithuania), we then arrive at the same insight. The thought of Levinas develops not from a noncommittal expatiation on the neutrality of things, but on the contrary proceeds from a concrete, (Jewish) flesh-and-blood experience. Inquiring into the lively, prephilosophical suppositions of Levinas' thought, we naturally come to the traumatic experience which he, as a member of the Jewish people, inevitably shared: the terror of Hitlerism¹. Even though Levinas will never explicitly make the holocaust a subject for reflection, we can still understand his thought as a critical, philosophical attempt to confront the fundamental catastrophe that was the holocaust².

We attempt to ground this proposition on four basic Levinasian categories³. In a first stage, we indicate how Levinas' category of being, *il y a* ('there is'), is based on the traumatic experience of the holocaust. His whole thought seems to unfold as an inquiry into a liberating solution from the fundamental 'fascism of being'. In a second phase, we describe the event of the *hypostasis* as the (first) human answer to *il y a*. The traumatic experience of the holocaust teaches Levinas that the identity-acquisition (*hypostasis*) can only bring about liberation halfway. During World War II, the Jewish people were thrown upon their own identity and were imprisoned within themselves. Moreover, *hypostasis* leads through the scarcity of means to a relentless *struggle for life* wherein people become 'wolves' (Hobbes) towards each other. Life in the concentration camps demonstrates this in a dramatic way. The question of salvation will therefore have to undergo a transformation to a liberation *from oneself*. In a third instance, it will be shown how only the dedication to the *face of the other* contains the promise of real liberation. Likewise here, the traumatic experience of the suffering of the other is exceptionally exemplary. It is only within this perspective that, in a fourth instance, we can allow the specific, *ethically qualified*, God-idea of Levinas to come to its rightful fullness.

1 Il y a: philosophical translation of the holocaust experience

At the height World War II, while being a prisoner of war of Nazi-Germany ⁴, Levinas wrote his first work, *De l'existence à l'existant* ⁵, which he completed shortly thereafter. In this study he developed a fundamental category that will become the key with which to understand all of his later thought: *il y a*. *Il y a* ('being-without-being') is the primordial catastrophic situation which threatens to take every concrete being by surprise with its anonymous, all-absorbing presence. It concerns no more than pure and brutal being with its inhuman neutrality. There is no this and there is no that; but there is likewise no nothing ⁶. It is just this threatening, formless being that awakens in people an exodus-dynamic, an irrepressible longing for liberation from this fundamental catastrophe.

This *il y a* is, however, never to be experienced directly because there is no subject which stands over and against an object. There is but this diffused, all-inundated and overwhelming anonymity of being. Only through a sort of mental extrapolation can we therefore arrive at an existential entry point to gain access to this marginal concept.

Since the war experience has been in fact the concrete *Sitz im Leben* wherein Levinas thought out this concept, the war is likewise the appropriate entry point to understand this notion ⁷. War is pre-eminently a chaotic experience wherein one can no longer be human ⁸. It is overwhelming in the fullness of its emptiness, an anonymity where human-being becomes impossible. Under Hitlerism, the Jewish people have been exposed to this *il Êy Êa* in the most explicit way. They have been loaded into trucks — at times sixty to seventy of them packed altogether — and were delivered to the concentration and extermination camps. For days on end, they were aimlessly shuffled among themselves, immersed in complete darkness where no one recognized no one: deprived of light and even sanitation. There is only the sweltering heat of being beside and against each other, without ventilation or food. There is only the dark chaos where one is no longer human but (still) cannot withdraw from existence ⁹. Having arrived in the Nazi camps the Jews were stripped of all that made one a person and were reduced to a state lower than that of objects ¹⁰. Here began a life of total de-subjectivisation ¹¹, of complete reduction to grey uniformity: bald-shaven, disinfected, reduced to numbers without names.

This is the actual meaning of *il y a*, the Levinasian category of being: everything is dissolved and loses its personal contours. In that sense, we could justifiably speak about the *il y a*-tic dimension of the holocaust.

During the holocaust there originated a manner of 'person'-hood which was never before seen in human history. Hitlerism created within that chaos the *Muselmänner*: the persons on the way back to the *il y a*. Everyone likened unto each other, being yet without thinking, without reactions, without soul, inescapably submitted to a comfortless anonymity and brutal being. People deteriorated to being 'living dead', wandering corpses whose only task was to await death upon command ¹².

The *il y a* is therefore the oppressive fullness of being that humans swallow and makes them no-body, abandoning them to total desolation and indifference. All distinctions disappear: between men and women, adults and children, learned and illiterate, families and relatives, life and death. Everything is put under one denominator. To be *Muselmänner* is to simmer in the *il y a*, to be eaten up by the absolute disconsolateness of simply being: always that numbing sameness, with no workdays nor holidays, with no yesterday and no tomorrow. There is only the desperate now to which there is no escape. Even the most elementary deed of dying loses its personal character: there is no life and there is no death anymore. It is the total loss of power over one's own subjectivity and to be totally submitted to the nothingness of being, without any possibility of resistance ¹³. Even suicide loses its meaning as the ultimate act of freedom. When people are lapped up by being, they cannot commit suicide anymore. Suicide presupposes a meaningful subject. In the holocaust, suicide lost (just as martyrdom) a great deal of its symbolic power and terminated itself in the chaos of the catastrophe. In such a manner did Nazism deliver people to a 'fatal immortality'.

The consequence of this total de-subjectivisation is horror (*horreur*). Being weighs upon you as a fatal desperation. As a person, you disappear like an exponent of an anonymous event where you can no longer be a person. Being is a diabolic power which inundates everything. In 1934, Levinas wrote an article about *La philosophie de l'hitlérisme* ¹⁴. One will never come across this in Levinas' bibliography because he later distanced himself from (the title of) the article. How can you ever call Nazism a system, a philosophy? The diabolic turns around every system to its contrary. Hitlerism is for Levinas the anti-system, the anti-state par excellence, an *Umwelt* ¹⁵ where all things and people are perverted to not-being-anymore. Hence, he writes:

Between 1934 and 1945 'there is' revealed nothing in itself of the generosity which the corresponding German expression '*es gibt*' seems to contain ¹⁶.

The *il y a* was thus prompted to Levinas by the fundamental traumatic experience of the holocaust ¹⁷. With this approach to being, Levinas' philosophy clearly stands as a reaction to the thought of Heidegger, which readily plays on the philosophical theme of the strange 'lightness of being' (the *es gibt*) ¹⁸. During his camp imprisonment in the forest, Levinas fought just as much against the depersonalizing powers of being. He has not become a nature lover, but a city dweller. Nature is rather the formless confusion and the adamant 'struggle for life' than a fascinating painting whereby one can dwell at length in full wonderment, free of any obligations.

The starting point of Levinas' thought is therefore not (as people have so often assumed) 'God' or 'the face', but this traumatic experience of the radical negation of the face wherein God speaks. This also explains Levinas' aversion to sacred divinities. In the enthusiasm of religious ecstasy, the subject is destroyed and one is brought into the fascination of the divine, a non-biblical, anonymous, fascist power, plain and simple.

The question now is: how do I evade from the *il y a* which time and again forms a threat. Already before the war (1935), Levinas posed the question in *De l'évasion*, the evasion from the imminent premonition (which also was already present in the thought of Rosenzweig ¹⁹) of *les angoisses de la guerre qui approchait* ²⁰. With the actual apocalyptic revolution of Nazism in the years that followed, the question has become even more stringent still.

2 The unbearable weight of human hypostasis

The human subject does not want to be reduced to no-thing or no-one. The massive, overwhelming being-as-such can only be conquered if, within being, a being from within its very self emerges, that would open the fullness of being by means of appropriating for itself being so much so that it can exist separately. This is the involitional movement *de l'existence à l'existant* (from being to being). With this dynamic of becoming-a-subject by the appropriation-of-being, we arrive at a second basic Levinasian category: hypostasis.

Hypostasis is becoming born to oneself by conquering being. A point suddenly emerges when one tears loose from the *il y a* and one contracts within oneself. Once again it is remarkable how the traumatic experience of Hitlerism forms the very vivid background of this concept. In an interview with Poirié, Levinas relates how the experience of hypostasis came his way during his imprisonment. With the group of Jewish prisoners among whom he dwelled, they had taken care of a little dog which greeted the commando every evening with its barking ²¹. To be no longer called by that general, damning name *Juden*, but to be recognized as self-possessed (human) beings within being, that is the joy of hypostasis. When the *Wehrmacht* understood how this little dog contributed to that, the poor animal was mercilessly slain.

The different uprisings which took place in the camps could also be described as a refusal of the *il y a*. Hypostasis is wrenching oneself away from murderous being and taking up arms for oneself. Hypostasis as *être pour soi* is the refusal of the depersonalizing, numinous powers of fascist being. It is an atheistic, 'manly' deed, the first instance of freedom: not by withdrawing from oneself (*Dasein*), but by establishing oneself as the origin (*archè*) against all anarchy.

The identity which is conquered in hypostasis is, however, no harmless, light-hearted relationship with oneself. It immediately turns dialectically towards a full reversion upon oneself. *Être pour soi* likewise means *être avec soi*. Sovereignty also implies being fettered to oneself. How being 'clings on' to the subject is again very well manifested in the anti-Semitic persecutions. Regarding this, Levinas writes:

Indeed, this [antisemitism] is an absolute persecution, because its intention paralyzes every form of escape, makes every reform impossible from the very start, forbids every devotion or apostasy — in the etymological sense of the term — and hereby touches the creature precisely in its innocence, this creature which is called back to its deepest identity ²².

The Jew of the twentieth century has felt more than anyone else the fatality of hypostasis. In an anti-Semitic environment, what stands central for the Jew is not the fear of being (Heidegger), but the fear of having to be there. Anne Frank can indeed go into hiding but she cannot efface herself or transform into an immaterial, intangible substance. Being-human (hypostasis) is to be affixed to oneself. Human identity contains an aspect of definitiveness which is inescapable.

Under Hitlerism, the Jew did not have to *do* something in order to be punished; *being* a Jew was already sufficient ground for punishment ²³. Under Nazism, a whole people was found guilty, not by their deeds, but by their very existence. Being-Jew became the prototype of the traumatic enchainment to oneself. There is no escape from one's own identity. Here, the original merit of hypostasis dialectically turns itself into the hindrance of oneself by oneself.

At this point we come across in Levinas a description of the nausea (*la nausée*). I am I and I can be nobody else. The nausea is the revulsion with one's own being. It is the experience of standing against the wall of one's own being whereby every evasion is sheer illusion. The nausea for one's own being was manifested in an unparalleled way during the Second World War in the actuality of the suffering of the Jewish people. Suffering is that vicious being thrown back upon one's identity without doors nor windows. It is the dreadful, carnal manner of being-with-yourself. Suffering makes the will ridiculous: there is no possibility for rationalisation or taking distance. In the holocaust, Levinas had reached the zenith of all human suffering ²⁴.

Here, we also trace the link between suffering and death. Death means deliverance from suffering. In this sense suffering is in fact a greater evil than death. Here the question of liberation takes a new turn: salvation for me now becomes a question of salvation from myself, without however being destroyed by death. Only now does an externalizing movement take place in the person. One becomes a question asking for an alterity that can liberate one from oneself without destroying oneself. This promise, according to Levinas, cannot be realized in a working association with the world. Work is directed to the persistence of the I. The world is reduced to an extension of one's own survival. Thus, the enchainment to oneself is not broken. On the contrary, it is even magnified because the I is now not only burdened with itself but also with the world. Behind the inscription of Auschwitz '*Arbeit macht Frei*' lies the motto of Buchenwald: '*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*'.

Consequently, if the person wants to be liberated from oneself, then one should encounter an alterity so radically different that one could not reduce such alterity to oneself. Only then will one be finally redeemed from oneself and not be restrained from existing. But does such an alterity exist in this century of the Auschwitz trauma?

3 The power of powerlessness

The weight of being is not even the most painful consequence of *hypostasis*. The definitive binding of hypostasis compels the person in the end to become a creature of *Wille zur Macht*. One of the most painful aspects of the holocaust is indeed the pent-up 'struggle for life' which rules over the prisoners. The horrors to which they were exposed made them wolves (Hobbes) towards each other. Levinas' thought does not pass over this egocentrism as a creaturely constitutive element of human personality. Hypostasis compels the person to be oriented towards reality in a reductionistic and self-interested manner. The ultimate cruelty of fascism is the fundamental revelation and glorification of this degenerate *Wille zur Macht* which revolves around itself. Here, we reach the core of Levinas' description of Hitlerism. Nazism reduces all others to the same. It is politics without ethics which destroys all that does not comply with it. It is that attempt of being which radically universalizes itself and eliminates on its own accord every non-conforming 'other'.

What can we learn from this according to Levinas? In Auschwitz it became extremely clear how the other can be lethally destroyed. Here we arrive at a crucial turning point in Levinas' thought: the vulnerability of the other. The appearance of the other creates the possibility for murder and manslaughter. We often shun away from the documents of the extermination camps because it reveals to what extent the person can be capable of. But the very examination of such documents reveals to me that that which is possible, is not allowed, or that which I can, I may not. Put in broader terms: in the traumatic experience the reflecting consciousness discovers itself immediately as a *moral* consciousness. To escape from this is impossible. Only 'revisionism' in the name of 'academic freedom' can go out of its way to avoid the traumatic events of this century ²⁵.

The traumatic experience of the suffering of the other indeed evokes such paradoxical emotions because the discovery of (my) power can not be divorced from the fact that this appropriated power is wrongful. The other who appears causes a trauma in my very nature: all my heroic efforts at self-unfolding is radically thrown into confusion. The face, as the incarnated vulnerability of the other, thwarts in effect not only my 'fascist' imperialism, but likewise questions this self-interestedness in principle. Auschwitz, where this 'face' was incarnated six million-fold, poses to us as well this one fundamental question: are we wolves towards each other (Hobbes) or are we each other's keepers (Cain)?²⁶

For Levinas, real human liberation, even in Auschwitz, lies in this: the safeguarding of the conscience, being provoked and challenged by the suffering of the other. In such manner have the young supported the old during the 'death marches'; fathers saving the scarcest of food from their very mouths in order to give it to their sons; women having decided in the hell of Auschwitz to give the unborn life a chance and brought children into the world; men defending the rights of pregnant women; women standing up for their and their children's right to food'. Authentic existence is thus for Levinas understandably no *Sein zum Tode* (Heidegger). My death becomes relativized in the light of the suffering and the death of the other. The rights of the person are originally the rights of the other person ²⁷. In this responsibility lies the promise of liberation from a suffocating entanglement within myself. Here, a fundamental human possibility likewise reveals itself: holiness. Evil is possible, yet so is holiness as well!

In this holiness lies a real promise of salvation from the oppressive weight of existence. The other descends upon my existence, comes from absolutely elsewhere and becomes precisely the refusal to be reduced to a function of my own self ²⁸. In my responsibility, I am called to protect and to promote the other in its alterity. The Viennese psychiatrist and survivor of the holocaust, V. Frankl, has thereby indicated how this 'task outside one's own skin' formed an important factor for survival ²⁹. He discovered that as a camp prisoner one could only increase one's inner resistance when one can be made to believe in a certain goal ³⁰.

With the creative realization of this responsibility, I need not deny nor suppress my I. My own self-unfolding is — within my responsibility — my one and only investment ³¹. My (originally self-interested) energy must not be eclipsed but transformed, re-directed towards availability for the other. With Levinas we reach a definitive track towards liberation. In order to withdraw from the terror of *il y a*, the I had to inevitably postulate itself this is the burdensome and often aggressive act of hypostasis. Only through de-postulating oneself via the dis-inter-ested relationship with the other, does the I become liberated from itself and yet not killed. The face of the other is the face of liberation ³².

4 Trauma and God

The person is thus the *possibility* to go into a full consideration of the original language of the face. This also implies that the person does *not necessarily* function at the level of responsibility. Nazism is the prototype of this refusal of responsibility. This 'aversion' of the ethical precept of the face is what Levinas calls (the real possibility of) evil.

At this juncture one must not expect that Levinas will conjure 'God' from his philosophical crystal ball. If the person refuses one's sacred responsibility, then there is no God, says Levinas, who comes in his omnipotence to straighten out our crooked lines. Responsibility is therefore (literally) dead-serious and irreversible. It is not in omnipotence that God's self-revelation originally takes place ³³. I am absolutely responsible and the first one who is responsible. Levinas borrows the saying from Dostoevsky: 'Each of us is indebted to the other, and I more than all others' ³⁴. An intervention from God would not have taken seriously this human responsibility.

Neither does Levinas wish to employ a God who promises eternal (heavenly) happiness. Such divine promise can offer no consolation for those who are *now* the victims of the irresponsible actions of others.

This rejection of every *deus ex machina* belongs to Levinas' broader rejection of every post-holocaust theodicy. The theodicy-project attempts precisely to save God's omnipotence and love over and against human suffering. In Auschwitz, however, heaven has shown itself more than ever to be empty. Since then it has never been possible to justify nor to exonerate God anymore ³⁵.

Once again, Israel found itself in the heart of the religious history of the world, in that it brought about the explosion of the perspectives within which the established religions confined themselves ³⁶.

The suffering in Auschwitz is a suffering for nothing. It makes every talk and thought in terms of 'punishment for sin', for example, not only impossible but also arrogant. Auschwitz reveals the non- and never justifiable character of the suffering of the other person. Since then, in view of the gas chambers and the cremation ovens, it has been extremely problematic, even 'blasphemous', to think of the sinfulness of Israel or of the heavenly promise which God has prepared in order to cover up for this suffering. What a fundamental disproportion between the theological answer on the one hand and the evil of evil on the other ³⁷!

The possibility of Auschwitz has therefore made Levinas radically question the centuries-old tradition of theodicy. In the camps, Nietzsche's words 'God is dead' received a quasi-empirical meaning ³⁸. If 'the burning children of Auschwitz' is to be the criterion for actual theology (as Greenberg states) then every exoneration of God in the form of theodicy has become impossible for all time.

The holocaust therefore means a rupture in the history of salvation: the person must pursue this history in 'a faith without theodicy'. Auschwitz reveals, with a clarity that strains the eye, the radical discrepancy between the whole western theological thought project and the concrete forms of suffering of the holocaust (*les cris d'Auschwitz qui retentiront jusqu'à la fin des temps* ³⁹). Even the so-called secularised theodicies of the human, socio-economic eschatology of history must give way for the (real) possibility of the end of the world: the universal holocaust ⁴⁰.

Process philosophy has turned around this category of divine omnipotence, and in the light of Auschwitz affirmed God's powerlessness ⁴¹. God becomes the compassionate friend who indeed understands the suffering one, but who cannot do anything about it. Even this com-passion-ate God cannot be for Levinas the final word. A God who merely suffers with us, still leaves the final and definitive word to evil and suffering. It becomes unclear to what extent, how and especially whether God remains a liberating and saving God. Then it is not the biblical God, but evil which is definitively omnipotent ⁴².

Even in Levinas' view God will associate himself with the humble, but then not as a powerless, emphatic God who resigns himself comfortingly to the existing situation of injustice. On the contrary, God will present himself as the One who — through the horror on the face of the other — unconditionally demands from me to do something to help the situation.

Responsibility is thus the very place where God comes to the fore as the idea of the Good, and inspires me as the Spirit of the Good in me. God radically associates himself with the humanism of the other. Religion is therefore not to be divorced from ethical praxis. The more I grow in responsibility, the closer I come to God. The question therefore is not how ethics without God is possible, but well how God is possible without ethics ⁴³. The theodicy-project that attempts to justify the pain of the neighbour is not only a source of immorality, but is even godless. The God-relationship is for Levinas always and from the very beginning ethical. It is in this sense that we must understand the expression 'to love more the Torah, than God' ⁴⁴. To be directed towards God is to be directed towards the other and the latter can only be achieved by following the Torah. One cannot serve God without serving the other.

This is to be understood from what has previously been discussed. The other is in fact no reissue of the I: in its capacity as other it situates itself in a dimension of loftiness, of ideality, of the divine. Thus I stand in relation with God by my relation with the other. To know God is to know what one must do. As the Spirit of the Good in me, He breaks through my complacent attachment to myself, so much so that I come loose from myself in an outward movement towards the Other, who never has to return to its starting point of a self-interested attempt at being anymore.

In this way, an *autrement qu'être*, an *au-delà de l'être* breaks through in the self-interested illeitytic act of Being. For Levinas, God does not show himself in the fearsome, numinous powers of nature. In the philosophy of Levinas, God is an 'opposite' that provokes me to make use of my freedom in the service of the other. God needs my yes-word in order to break through the overwhelming and alienating closeness of *il y a* and to establish a reign of justice and peace ⁴⁵. This concerns a fundamentally other God than the Nazist *Gott mit uns* which inflames the person into a blind, pathetic but completely irrational enthusiasm, where the charisma of the *Führer* becomes more important than the content of the message and where God is put at the service of the (*il y a*-tic) *Wille zur Macht* of the leaders. In relation to such sacred godheads, Judaism for Levinas is nothing else than atheism ⁴⁶.

Der andere Gott dagegen (!) ist ein Protest gegen Auschwitz. Und dieser Gott erscheint im Antlitz des Anderen. In diesem Sinn fällt Gott ins Denken ein, aber in ein streng phänomenologisch verfaßtes Denken. Und das ist Ethik ⁴¹.

Finally, in this light, Messianism receives a new meaning with Levinas. Messianism proceeds from the surety that Someone shall come who will end and complete history. Now we know that history can go awry. Thus Wiesel suggests in *The gates of the forest* ⁴⁸ that the Messiah who did not come in Auschwitz, will never come anymore. We must not preach about Messianism. Levinas speaks of '*une religion sans promesse*' ⁴⁹, a religion that promises nothing: if the person fails in one's responsibility, the whole of history goes up in smoke. History does not necessarily have a happy ending ⁵⁰. With Levinas Messianism thereby receives a new, ethical content: 'the Messiah, that I am'. To be I is to be Messiah ⁵¹. The Messiah is the just one who suffers and the one who takes upon himself the suffering of the other.

Such is the personal responsibility which the one person has towards the other that even God cannot dispense with it. Here we come to a final aspect of Levinas' God understanding. Evil is in his philosophy no mystical principle; it is the concrete insult that the one person does to the other. He points to the full autonomy of the insulted person and to the full responsibility of the one who touches a person. Sin cannot be erased by any rite, since no one, not even God, can take the place of the victim. We arrive at this point at one of the most provoking consequences of the holocaust: in Levinas' philosophy, after Auschwitz religion has become an (exclusively) ethical matter. Human responsibility is such a serious matter that neither God's omnipotence, nor God's mercy dismisses the person (not even post-factum) from the seriousness of one's 'task outside one's own skin' ⁵². 'A world wherein forgiveness becomes omnipotent, becomes inhuman' ⁵³. Humanity after Auschwitz will have to make Holy History go further without theodicy-faith. More than ever, a plea shall be made for the Messianic possibilities of the I in each one of us, inspired by the vulnerability of the other. Likewise, at this juncture, a few new perspectives open up for our (post)modern time.

5 In conclusion: ethics and forgiveness

With this presentation of Levinas' thought schema, we want to formulate one consideration. Levinas' thought leads in an important extent towards a reduction of religion to an *ethical* religion. Religion is threatened to exclusively become ethics, that is, doing what is good. But what if the person fails, if courage falls short, and falls into sin? An ethical God can but only judge. Here rises the danger of the terror of ethics. Nazism could also be interpreted along these lines ⁵⁴. Nazism seems to be seated on a definite, ruthless (indeed perverted) 'ethical' code. Nazism was in all possible respects merciless. Whoever did not comply with the 'ethical' demands, inevitably deserved to be eliminated. Therefore we must also put forth the question: 'what after ethics.' The Judaeo-Christian God is also a God of mercy. Ethics can hereby be saved from its unmercifulness. The person can never completely be reduced to one moment of one's existence. One is always more than what one does. However, for ethics after Auschwitz, one of the most pressing questions is whether there are no situations wherein humanity is done so much violence that we find ourselves in the ethical impossibility of forgiveness. In the case of genocide one can without the least doubt speak of *l'impardonable* ⁵⁵. If not, a forgiveness that

is too easily granted leads once again to a trivialization of ethics. The holocaust, in other words, should be an onset for us to once again reflect on the relationship between ethics and theology.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my intellectual master, Prof. Dr. Roger Burggraave, who's extraordinary and outstanding knowledge of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas has brought me to the subject of the holocaust and by that changed my life in a decisive way. This essay has particularly profited from comments by my colleagues Drs. Luc Anckaert & Drs. Bert Roebben. I thank Drs. Edmund Guzman for his translation of the text from Dutch to English.

Biography

Didier Pollefeyt holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy, a Licentiate Degree in Religious Studies and a Master's Degree in Theology. He has written two studies on the jewish post-holocaust thinking of Rubenstein and Fackenheim, both of which were awarded a prize of encouragement of the *Foundation Auschwitz* (Brussels, 1989 & 1992). Since 1991 he works as researcher of the National Fund for Scientific Research (N.F.W.O.) at the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University Louvain (Belgium) on 'post-holocaust theology, ethics and forgiveness'. Last september, his recent work 'Religious teaching of the holocaust' was awarded by the Belgian 'Prize of Peace 1993'.