

**A new translation of an extract taken from Jean-François Lyotard, “Discussions, ou: phraser ‘après Auschwitz’” in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Les Fins de l’homme: partir du travail de Jacques Derrida: Colloque de Cérisy, 23 Juillet - 2 Août 1980* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 292-3 and 296-9.**

**For the original translation see: Jean-François Lyotard, “Discussion or Phrasing ‘After Auschwitz,’” translated by by Georges Van Den Abbeele, *Working Paper of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin 2* (Fall 1986): 1-32.**

Does the anonymity [*of the dead*] that weighs down ‘Auschwitz’ has the following signification: not that it is unable to affect a linking of phrases, but that it affects a linking of phrases that can have no ‘result’?

It would then be a question of what eludes a *result*. The task would then be to think—and therefore to affect the thinking already underway—a dialectic that could not be ‘a’ moment within the speculative discourse. A type of thought that would, for example, obey the rules of equivocity and immanent derivation, while not paying attention to the rules of expression. But how could that be possible? Is it not the case that what is at stake here is given a name, that this name is *its* name? And if it isn’t a Self that anoints it with a name, then how could this be possible? How could the dialectic remain negative? Is it not the case that under the denomination of negative dialectics, it is still a question of affecting a linking of phrases that seek themselves out and that its name would be misleading: a rupture hiding a fracture.

It is at this heightened stage of articulation that one should ask the question of the necessity of the linking of phrases, that is, of the ‘we.’ In ‘our’ societies, the first person plural in principle addresses the question of sovereignty, of authority or more precisely, the question of authorization. The ‘we’ is precisely what allows the linking of prescriptive utterances

(clauses in law, jurisprudences, bills, decrees, ordinances, commandments) and their legitimation. A prescriptive phrase has a specific mode of address: it is an obligation for  $x$  to accomplish action  $a$ . However, for that to be legitimate, it is often the case that in ‘our’ societies,  $x$  and  $y$ —the addressee of the prescriptive utterance and the addressor of its legitimation—are the same. The legislator must also submit to the obligation. Inversely, the legislated is the authority that legitimizes the law. The first says: *I mandate that I must* and the second, *I mandate that I must*. All four instances (addressee and addressor of the prescription and its legitimation respectively) are perfectly interchangeable and united under a same ‘we.’ This is the way the figure of autonomy establishes itself...

Let us return to the difficulties that come with the first person plural, ‘we.’ Most naturally, language authorizes the synthesis of the *I* and the *other* [*II*] in the first person plural ‘we,’ which gives it its linguistic value (the other being *I* and *Thou*). However, the philosophy that focuses on the subject of phrases (feeds this analysis as it feeds itself from it) always stumbles upon an old problem: the ‘not-I’ [*le non-moi*]. ‘Not-I’ is included in the ‘we’ [*Il y a du non-moi dans le nous*]. Furthermore, pragmatics adds to this philosophical obstacle the heterogeneity of the two phrases: the descriptive and the prescriptive.

If ‘Auschwitz’ has no name, isn’t it because it is the proper name of a para-experience, that of the impossibility of a ‘we.’ Is it not the case that in the camps, there is no plural subject? And that because of this lack of a plural subject, no subject ‘after Auschwitz’ is able to name itself through a recalling of such an ‘experience’?

One will object first that the theoretical and philosophical difficulty to form a ‘we’ worsens when the prescription and the legitimation takes the shape of a ‘*I order you to die*’ like that uttered by the S.S. to their victims. The sense of the prescription would explain the failure of the camp’s ‘we.’

However, this is not a unique case. Public institutions (familial, political, military, lobbyist, confessional) at times prescribe their own members to die. The issue here is that if they can claim these members as *their own*, it is because—notwithstanding the mechanism in place, which matters not here—they *own* that right. We have here a ‘we’ that unites the legislator that gives the order and the legislated that receives the order. This ‘we’ explains why one can die by obeying a prescription *and* out of ‘free-will’ or ‘deliberately.’ The *Die!* can thus be formulated so as to suit the scenario: *Die instead of seeking to escape* (Socrates in prison), *Die instead of admitting defeat* (the battle of Thermopylae, the French commune), etc. These formulations do not change the principle according to which the prescription is executable when the swap between the two phrases (giving the order and legitimizing the order) is said to be possible. (But said in which phrase?)

Nonetheless, the prescription *Die!*, whatever its formulation, even at its most basic, distinguishes itself from other phrases belonging to the prescriptive family. The fact is that, in the logic of phrases, if someone obeys the exact meaning of this prescription, their proper name can no longer figure in the register of addressees and addressors of any future phrases. He or she could only be figured at the recall of the referent. If one were to find it in the context of addressees or addressors, it could only be within the context of mediating phrases (citations, prosopopoeia, chronicles, and any form of relational instance) for which the aforesaid proper name would, should, or might have been the addressee or addressor. Such a freezing-out clause (death) prohibits such a person from transforming the prescription into a normative phrase such as: *I mandate as law that...*

The only escape from becoming the recall of the referent, immediate or mediated that is death is to identify with a ‘we’ (whatever its name, it matters little here) that is able to legitimate, as addressor and addressee, all

possible orders even that of prescribing death. By changing the order of phrases, by substituting him or herself from the addressee of the ultimate prescription to that of its legitimation, he or she escape the death penalty and can in this instance die. He or she swaps his or her singular surname for a collective proper name...

In ‘Auschwitz,’ what remains without name and gives no result is not the fact that *Die!* has been uttered, but the fact that the substitution from being the addressee of the ultimate prescription to that of its legitimation has been made impossible. What orders death is exclusively other to that which it is usually addressed. The former does not have to legitimate it to the latter and the latter cannot enter the legitimating process of the former. The two universes of phrases are without common usage. What the prescriptive phrase puts forward (the command *Die!*) is not repeated by the normative phrase (hence the titular legislators’ reaction: ‘We didn’t know this was happening’); what is present in the normative phrase: *This is the law* becomes unknown in the universe of the prescriptive phrase *Die!* (hence the victims reaction: ‘Why are they doing this? ‘This is not happening’).

The fact is that this is not an accident, but a death penalty. However, this penalty cannot be enforced without a ‘we’ that allows it to be enforced. One cannot evade it. ‘It is man’s privilege to know his law, writes Hegel in the *Encyclopaedia*; in truth he can truly obey only such known law - even as his law can only be a just law, as it is a known law’ (§ 529). ‘Auschwitz’ would then be the name of this impossible phrase for which the law is not known, cannot be just, and the prescription cannot be enforceable, otherwise man loses its distinctiveness, that is, its ‘we.’ At Auschwitz and thereafter, we no longer know what dying means. It’s the end of the infinite beautiful death, the end of death. We are in business.

Why then say ‘*after Auschwitz*’? From the moment there is a disjunction (or a delinking) between the legitimation process and the prescription, a

disjunction that forbids or destroys the formation of a 'we,' we are no longer in a position to even ruminate or cogitate the lack of result. What would indeed be a 'we' that would result from such disjunction? If one only takes negative dialectics without positive-rational operators, there could be neither a 'we' nor any other kind of result that would allow one to do this or that. There would not even be a spirit, the spirit of a nation or the spirit of humanity, these other kinds of 'we' equally able to take on the name 'Auschwitz,' to think it, and to think itself through it. The name 'Auschwitz' would remain empty, as if a mechanical memory, abandoned by the concept. This is why it remains anonymous. In this way, 'Auschwitz' would no longer signify a ricochet, but the repetition of a *Metrum* that would rhythm no inflection: and it means nothing.

But could we not attempt with the help of a painful paradox or an inhuman or other than human tension to draw a result from this death without reparation? (And would it be a result?) If this were possible, then this result, this other naming for 'we,' would come from a non-sense, that is, from the addressee's incapacity—the result of the prescription *Die!*—to identify with the addressor in order to legitimate the prescription. This result would amount to say that the irretrievable still manages to produce a form of witnessing (that of the inequality between the finite and the infinite) and the failure of mediation still manages to expose the infinity that prescribes death. In other words, this would amount to say that under the S.S.' prescription, which cannot be obeyed, which can only force 'us' to be victims, a request still manages to be heard, a request coming from an impossibility, an identification stemming from what cannot be identified with. Could this not be seen as if the loathsome buffoonery of the holocaust's administration, as David Rousset calls it, would have been able to recall against itself that there could be no 'we' able to bring together the addressees with those who legitimate it through a dialectical imposture? Could this not also mean that the abuse and abject injury done to the victims become the mark of a radical absolute and of a transcendence for all kinds of demands (for all kinds of prescriptions)

perceived by the addressee? But isn't infinity not what precisely escapes identification? Isn't infinity precisely that which is absurd, the beyond of what coerces, what is intolerable, the request that befell Abraham, the 'miraculous' in Emmanuel Levinas's sense? A 'we' can perhaps identify itself from this lack of identification: a community of addressees taken back by the 'miraculous,' 'hostages' as Levinas again says?

This 'we' would not be ethical, neither as a *Sittlichkeit* (or 'good conduct,' as Maurice de Gandillac translates it) nor in the sense of a morality, at least if we persist in understanding this word in Kant's sense, as a reason and pure will in its practical usage—something which would end up ascribing, as Levinas retorts, an intelligibility to the addressee of the moral law even though Kant himself admitted that its sense is 'impenetrable.' This new 'we' would shape itself from the ruins of positive rationality and of the humanism contained therein. This 'we' would forbid philosophy from describing the prescription. This 'we' would then never manage to be a real 'we,' would never manage to stabilise itself as a 'we,' always already undone before it is even uttered, only identifiable thanks to the non-identity of a 'thou,' an unpronounceable that would prescribe with an 'I' as hostage. This 'we' would relate to the infinite not through understanding, but by letting itself be taken by undoing, a passivity to its own prescription. Is this the kind of result that comes out of Auschwitz? ... If Auschwitz speaks, it is not in order to say what makes no sense, but what makes sense and that it is necessary to speculate. If Auschwitz does not speak, if death is meaningless, then it is in order to say that it is not possible to speculate.