

**Jean-Paul Martinon, “Shame: Intentionality in Reverse,” in Suzana Milevska, ed., *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation and Agency* (Stenberg Press, 2015), © Stenberg Press, 2015.**

Shame fell on me as I entered Gisozi, the Genocide Memorial Center in Kigali, Rwanda. It fell on me on September 6, 2006, in a surreptitious manner.<sup>1</sup> I walked inside the lobby of the center and found myself in front of a tall Rwandese woman who asked me where I was from.<sup>2</sup> After a polite exchange of words about my country of origin, she asked me what I knew of the genocide. At the time, I didn't know much. So I blurted out a few words to give the impression that I hadn't just stumbled on this memorial center. She quickly guessed that I knew little. This made me ashamed because next to the center there was a mass grave where a quarter of a million bodies are buried, and there I was admitting to being ignorant of a colossal event in history that occurred in my lifetime. How could I know so little about it? How did I live until now without a proper awareness of this mass killing? The sting of shame was unbearable. Of course, she didn't spare me. She left me to stew in the discomfort of my shame.

This particular shame was a curious feeling because it was exclusively based on ignorance and not on a previous action or deed. I felt shame not because I had acted badly or indecently, but because I was blissfully ignorant. This was a shame that revealed myself as being a bit dim-witted, a bit slow on the uptake. It basically said: I have lived through the year 1994 without much awareness of what went on in the world. But it also said something far worse. It also said: I have lived quite happily between 1994 and 2006 in complete ignorance of a major historical event with far-reaching global consequences. The shame was therefore not just due to ignorance; it was the result of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Most of the background reading for this paper is taken from the work of Emmanuel Levinas. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Lisa Guenther who, through her remarkable work, provided numerous invaluable insights into the theme of shame, and to Professor Suzana Milevska, the organizer of the conference and editor of *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation, and Agency*.

<sup>2</sup> Further information on this welcoming Rwandese attendant to the Memorial Centre can be found in Jean-Paul Martinon, *After “Rwanda,” In Search of a New Ethics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013).

way I led my life; it directly questioned the way I acted, what I did, where I went, who I met, et cetera. Indeed, this shame revealed much more than simple ignorance; it directly pointed to who I was, to my very being, not just there in Kigali, but during all the hours and days that I had lived on Earth since birth.

Considering that this shame touched everything about my existence, it became clear that the shame I experienced was not really of the order of morality. Being ignorant or naive was, indeed, contrary to shame, always negotiable. Against the accusation of ignorance, I could, for example, have defended myself and argued back the following: "There is no reason why I should have been aware of a war that took place thousands of kilometers away from me, among people I did not know. Knowing all the world's events is only a delusion that today's world, oversaturated as it is with twenty-four-hour news feed, imposes on us. No matter how sophisticated our news media technology is, are we not always already partly blind to what happens in the world, even if it happens in front of our very own eyes?" Being able to argue back in this manner would have showed that ignorance or naïveté was indeed tradable and was therefore in the order of morality. By contrast, the shame that I endured in Kigali escaped this order because it was *not*, as this essay will strive to show, something that could have entered negotiation and therefore the economy of conventional morality.

My shame, indeed, escaped morality and negotiation because it directly pointed to a structure of being. To realize that I was ashamed was to acknowledge that I was, momentarily, a diminished being. I wanted to crawl under the carpet. I wanted to disappear. This diminution of being showed that through shame I was no longer myself; I was no longer a self-governing subject. This realization was crushing; it highlighted the fact that most of my life had been spent living in the sway of certainty that I was an "I" in the full possession of the way I portray myself. This "I" was no longer the upright master, the lord of the body, all eyes, conquering and grasping the world. This "I" was suddenly in the other's hands. This "I" had become an "it" belonging to the other. Jean-Paul Sartre rightly noted the feeling of shame a subject

experiences: “A feeling of being finally what I am, but elsewhere, over there, for the Other.”<sup>3</sup> The shame I felt in Kigali thus highlighted an unusual dimension of subjectivity: being, through the other’s gaze, an object that, for some reason, had no or little correlation with my own always-glorious subjectivity.

But the sudden crumbling of my triumphant “I” had another more profound cause. The “I” crumbled not just because it was suddenly objectified, but because it also highlighted, at an even more basic state, the *fact* that I was occupying space and time. It pointed to the inescapable reality that, however much I wished it otherwise, I was taking up a portion of space and time. As Levinas’s translator, Jacques Rolland, rightly remarked, in a commentary on the essay “On Escape,” shame is always the discovery of an occupancy of space and time that is utterly unjustified.<sup>4</sup> My unexpected shame therefore showed something that no physiology, biology, anthropology, psychology, or any other ontic science could ever deal with: the fact that “underneath” this supposedly masterful subject or object of representation; I was occupying space and time without any reason or rationale, not even a valid argument. Not even my parents could justify such occupancy because although they conceived me, they had little say in the outcome. Why this sperm and why this egg? They could never tell. Shame had therefore a unique power that no one, not even theologians, could help make sense of because it directly revealed the impossibility of giving a legitimate reason for *this* taking up of space and time.

The formidable consequence of this bottom-line revelation of being utterly unjustified was that I could *never* therefore have been the subject of shame. Shame could never belong to me. Only the other could bring me shame. In Rwanda, the shame that I experienced, was *given* to me, by this beautiful tall woman who attended the entrance to the Genocide Memorial Centre. She

---

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 291.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rolland, “Annotation,” in Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Jacques Rolland (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 83.

held my shame, she sustained it, and only *she* was able to lift it at will. She was not so much in control and masterful, she simply towered above me in a nonhierarchical way. I was simply powerless, in her hands, ashamed. I realized this did not constitute a perverse masochistic desire to let her dominate me or have sway over me. This was a way of revealing that although a personal experience, shame was not, paradoxically, personal. Shame referred to an inter-subjective structure involving space and time that showed that the main subject in this relation was, *for once*, not me.

This intersubjective structure was in fact quite complex because it did not concern a relation between two objects: distinct and autonomous beings, for example. The intersubjective relation in question here involved subjects who were able to shame one another, that is, who were able to *reveal* this bottom-line occupancy of space and time. The tall Rwandese woman who shamed me didn't shame me because I was ignorant and therefore an object of ridicule. She shamed me because *she gave me more than I was able to think* and as such was over and above me. She was above me not only because she had an experiential and intellectual knowledge of the genocide, but because her *gift was incalculable*, un-exchangeable, beyond anything I could have dreamed of returning.<sup>5</sup> This gift put her then and there in a position whereby she opened me the world, not only the dark and somber page of history that is 1994, but also and above all, a world that I, in my lost power, could no longer recognize. However strange, shame was effectively a gift that revealed the intersubjective as absolute dissymmetry, that is, as a situation where the Other was effectively above and I was below—always.<sup>6 7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> For a different account of this gift, see Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (New York: SUNY, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> There is no space for me to expand on this. See my previous book: Jean-Paul Martinon, *The End of Man* (New York: Punctum Books, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> I use here a capital letter to distinguish it from the other as *alter ego*. The Other with a capital letter refers to what escapes all possibility of conceptualization, what is allergic to the synthesis operated by a Kantian "I think." Levinas obviously talks remarkably about this Other, however, it is Derrida who formulates it in the most simple way: "Without making language the accident of thought, we would have to account for this: that, within language, that which is always "*in regimen*" and in the least generality [i.e. the Other] is, in its meaning, un-declinable and beyond genre." Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference* trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 130.

In front of such an incredible asymmetry, in front of this *gift* that made me realize I wasn't really all that masterful; two things happened:

The first thing that happened was that she suddenly became synonymous with God.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that she was (or still is) God Herself, but that she was suddenly *synonymous* with God. The reason being that through the act of shaming me, *she opened up*, in a godly fashion, *the infinite to me*. Not a vulgar infinity or an infinity of accountant, one that can be counted starting with a random number. No, an infinite beyond all forms of calculations, an infinity allergic to the synthesis of an "I think." A unique opening that is rarely talked about because it can always easily be misunderstood for some kind of ill-founded metaphysical statement. By shaming me, by simply *making me think more than I could*, she stood then and there for God: she symbolized the infinite. Once again, this was no mysticism or divine incarnation. This was simply the realization that it was impossible for me to truly understand the gift that I received from her because it simply pointed at what I could never have *imagined, anticipated, seen coming, or calculated in advance*. Asymmetrically positioned, she could only represent something akin to God—an absolute (utterly untainted by anything) I could have projected onto her, and thereby, anything spiritual or religious.

The second thing that happened was that in return, I could only become a usurper. I was a usurper because although I wished to crawl under the carpet and disappear; I could never delete myself altogether. In front of what I perceived to be a symbol for or a sign from God, I was, by my very existence, usurping her in my inability to obliterate my very own presence. As Lisa Guenther pointed out in an essay on this theme: "whether or not I have done something wrong, *merely to exist is already to exist in the place of another*, eating food that could have satisfied another's hunger, drinking water that

---

<sup>8</sup> The God in question here is obviously, as hinted in this paragraph, neither religious nor spiritual. There is no metaphysical assumption, only the indication that something or someone gives me more than I can think, and that through such an indication a realm alien to representation is both paradoxically opened up and withheld. For a lengthy description on this, see Jean-Paul Martinon, "Time Unshackled," in *New Formations* (2015, forthcoming).

could have meant the difference between her death and survival.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, although she was giving me the most incredible gift of all, although she was giving me the infinite by shaming me, I could only usurp her space and time in return; I could only take away from her what sustained her very life and thus *potentially* precipitate her untimely death.

Ashamed, I was effectively helpless *and* usurper, I was therefore dangerous. I not only took myself as an object, but I also remained, subject, here and there, occupying space and time, a space and time that she, in her magnanimity, could never occupy. This impossibility of occupying my space and time showed that, even at its most diminished, even at the height of my shame, my being could also be, however paradoxical this sounds, murderous. This had nothing to do with being a criminal. This had to do with an inalienable truth. Even if she had kicked me out of the center, she could still not, wherever I went in the world, occupy my space and time. And this was precisely what made me a usurper and potential murderer: I *shamelessly* took “my place in the sun” as Levinas would say,<sup>10</sup> and she, she could only shame me, reduce me, but never annihilate me, not even if she killed me, because even through death, *I would still have been*, an irrevocable past, a past that remained, at least for a while, mine, usurper, “in-perpetuity” a murderer—and this even if I had died a saint.

This shameless occupancy of space and time exposed something even more fundamental. It revealed that I was incapable of breaking free from myself, from this potentially murderous place in the sun. In other words, I discovered that I was always riveted to myself, unable to disappear properly even from behind the carpet, unable to justify this unjustified space and time. In an analysis of this theme, Guenther rightly and most beautifully called it our

---

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Guenther, “Shame and the Temporality of Social Life,” *Continental Philosophical Review* 44, vol. 1 (2011): 29, DOI 10.1007/s11007-011-9164-y (my emphasis).

<sup>10</sup> “My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun,’ my home—have they not been a usurpation of places which belong to the others already oppressed or starved by me, expelled by me into a third world: a repelling, an exclusion, an exile, a spoliation, a killing. ‘My place in the sun,’ said Pascal, ‘the beginning and prototype of usurpation of the whole earth.’” Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), 124.

“ontological self-encumbrance”<sup>11</sup>: this feeling of *having to be* oneself, the burden of one’s own existence, the irremissibility or impossibility of escaping being ourselves. “*I can neither be what I am nor refuse to be.*”<sup>12</sup> This was probably the most cruel aspect of shame’s gift: the revelation of the unbearable and non-negotiable weight of having to be just one, me, there, undeletable and unexchangeable—the suffocating weight of not being able to *be* another person, of *having* another life.

The realization of this ontological self-encumbrance is what allowed me to see the difference between shame and guilt. To understand this difference, it was necessary again to separate the latter from tradable morality. If I understood guilt *within* the order of morality, then I would necessarily reduce myself to the status of object. As object, I would then think of myself as the objectified *cause* of an action and “the guilt” experienced as the *result* of this action. The outcome could only be justice as reparation (undergoing therapy in order to deal with this supposedly scientifically verifiable fact known as “guilt,” for example) or retaliation (accepting the verdict of a judge who supposedly knows about “guilt,” for example).<sup>13</sup> If, however, I tried to conceive of guilt outside of tradable morality, then guilt would take on a different meaning.

Guilt is the realization of subjectivity. Only through a certain accusation can an “I” indeed emerge. Only through the realization of guilt (a realization taking place after the bottom-line realization of my facticity through shame), can the possibility of the subject arise. This was not a new realization. As Judith Butler

---

<sup>11</sup> Guenther, “Shame and the Temporality of Social Life,” 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 33 (my emphasis).

<sup>13</sup> Which, as we all know, can only in the end legitimize the violence of one narrative over another. As Simon Critchley remarks “In [Levinas’s] ‘Peace and Proximity,’ the question of the passage from ethics to politics is articulated around the theme of Europe and more specifically what Levinas refers to as ‘the ethical moment in the crisis of Europe.’ The crisis is the result of an ambiguity at the heart of the European liberal tradition, where the attempt to found a political order of peace on the ‘Greek wisdom’ of autonomy, solidarity, and reciprocity becomes a guilty conscience that recognizes how this political order has turned into—and indeed often legitimized—the violence of imperialism, colonialism, and genocide.” Simon Critchley, “Foreword,” in Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity” (1984), trans. Peter Atterton and Simon Critchley, in Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 161.

noted, Nietzsche already saw that the subject can only emerge through a retroactive understanding of itself, a reflexivity in which the “I” first tears itself away as an object, that is, as an objectified and answerable “I.”<sup>14</sup> While shame highlighted that I could not justify or escape occupying space and time, guilt, by contrast, highlighted that we, as subjects, are all equal as usurpers of space and time. As Levinas said, quoting Dostoevsky, “*everyone* is guilty in front of *everyone* else and me more than all the others.”<sup>15</sup> Guilt understood outside of morality therefore highlighted the more common self-reflexivity, one that renders us answerable as “I,” as subject, to everyone else. *We are all guilty of being.*

Unfortunately, whether it was shame or guilt, nothing, not even the tall Rwandese woman could have helped with this cumbersomeness, with this impossibility of justifying *this* very space and time. Even if she tried, she was indeed unable to alter this unbearable situation. She, in her magnanimity, could only shame this self-encumbrance, the inescapable facticity of this very being. With her infinitely shaming gaze, she made me realize the unbearable condition that was mine, the fact that I could only stubbornly remain here and there, occupying a space and time that she could never occupy. *Shame was precisely what revealed my persistence, my stubborn perseverance in being.* In a way, this was her weighty task, making sure that this stubbornness was revealed, that through shame, there could be nowhere to hide, that no carpet could dissimulate my body properly, that it would always stick out, shaming me in my persistence in being, always, again and again. I was facing the harshest reality of all: being incapable of fleeing myself.

*And I had to carry on.* Not only did I need to reveal my ignorance of the genocide, I also had to accept the shame of not being able to disappear, of witnessing my body remaining there with all its weight and height, and to just *carry on*. To carry on—especially when feeling utterly ashamed—was a

---

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, “Responsibility,” in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 85.

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocations of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 168.



curious liminal phenomenon because it exposed how I *persisted* no matter what. I carried on *because I had to*. This “because I had to” was effectively the first sign that I was already slowly reasserting my position in the sun, that I was taking back the control of my being, that I was reclaiming the objectification of the other, and that I was reinstating my subject back on its throne and my body in space and time. To carry on was to finally cover—metaphorically—my shameless nudity. To persist in being, even in my shame, was indeed to dress up the facticity of my very presence, to cover over my murderous body. No wonder real clothes play such a huge role in covering our shame. Beyond protection and an expression of identity, clothes are what help us to deal with the self-encumbrance of our being, with our inability of fleeing ourselves, with our shameful spatial and temporal criminality.

Hence the fact that shame was effectively a form of “intentionality in reverse.” This expression, which I borrow from Levinas, could give the impression that I am referring to un-intentionality, the opposite of intentionality, something not done on purpose, for example. But “intentionality in reverse” is not the same thing as un-intentionality. “Intentionality in reverse” means that there is an intention, but for some reason, it goes in the other direction, it backtracks, it moves backward, exposing myself without being able to do anything to prevent it. In Kigali, it was *she* who, through her gift, pulled this intention out of me, an intention that I could neither control nor master. Her generous gesture made me realize that I could not but intentionally reverse; expose myself in all my cumbersomeness. As Levinas said, “I *could* not not have power.”<sup>16</sup> “Intentionality in reverse” or shame was basically the bottom line for me; the most precarious of situation because not even clothes could alter or dress it. I could *not, not* be, in my space and time.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesnes University Press, 1969), 84 (translation modified).

<sup>17</sup> If I had enough time, I would have liked to explore this theme through a reading of the *Muselmänner* in Primo Levi’s book *If This Is a Man* and Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*. These are specific examples of this unbearable cumbersomeness that would necessitate lengthy and careful analyses to give them justice.

“Intentionality in reverse.” Once this reversing took place, once the body came out from under the carpet and accepted to “carry on,” my conscience finally emerged. With shame, with this exposure of my reversing intention, my conscience had no other choice, but to set off and begin questioning the naive right of my dangerous powers, the glorious, but unjustified spontaneity of being alive—criminal. Of course, this conscience was set off so as to reinstate the sovereignty of a tradable moral position (for example, accepting the fact that I needed to listen to the story of this genocide), but this moral position could only take place once I realized that I was occupying space and time and that no crawling under the carpet could change this. The awakening of conscience occurred not in the discovery of shame, but immediately afterward, right when I *began to conceal it*; right when I realized that I could cover my body again. In other words, the awakening of conscience occurred only when I could do nothing else but to *violently* reassert the unjustifiable: my body in space and time, gloriously sovereign, murderously unjustified once more.

The crucial issue for me was *not to let myself feel comfortable* with this sudden awakening of conscience. In other words, the issue was not to accept the concealment of shame as if such concealment were a perfectly acceptable way of remaining in the sun. In order to refrain from this, I felt that my conscience should instead be an effort to persist at the level of the discovery of shame, at the cusp of its concealment. An incredible effort because it implied training my conscience to stay right at a stage when my body finally accepted being under the carpet, visible for all to see. This conscience could not therefore be simply understood as an inner feeling or voice guiding us in our behavior. It was much more than that. It was the effort of keeping shame exposed even if no longer ashamed. It was the effort of not hiding my occupancy of space and time; of not letting powerful clothes dress it so as to regain a violent position of mastery and control. Conscience was therefore for me the effort of keeping the shameful of my unjustified and murderous existence *open for all to see*, or to put it differently, of accepting the *exposure* of my unbearable cumbersomeness.

Understood in this way, shame thus pointed at an incredible ethical moment: the moment when my perpetual struggle for mastery and domination *finally* turned its attention toward the other, when it *finally* conceded that the other was *more* important than the game of securing a place in the sun. As Guenther remarked in the same essay, “shame shifts the focal point from preserving my own self-relation towards a responsible relation with others.”<sup>18</sup> In Kigali, this was a most shaky and ambivalent moment because the temptation to reassert my place in the sun was immense and because the need to overcome shame could not be easily dismissed. I could have tried, for example, to shift the topic so as to lead my interlocutor’s gaze elsewhere and thus regain the mastery of my all-conquering “I.” But I refrained from doing so. Instead, I attempted the very first step of an ethics mentioned above; a small step that intended to open up dialogue not on the basis of an economic exchange of information, but on the basis of a responsible recognition that space and time were indeed occupied violently.

Such a fragile step was not an easy one to take. Shame asked of me to manage the unbearable encumbrance of my existence and through such management, to turn it into a gesture toward the other. I could not overcome or diminish myself, and such inability was the only way to begin addressing the other. Shame really pointed at a question of sur-vival, not some kind of vitalist flow of energy lurking underneath my ego, but what Derrida described as the life that goes over and beyond life; i.e., what maintains the facticity of my existence. In order to explain this, Derrida references Walter Benjamin who, in “The Task of the Translator,” makes a distinction between *überleben* (surviving beyond one’s death, through a child, for example) and *fortleben*, living on, continuing to live, the continuation of life itself.<sup>19</sup> The step my shame required of me was precisely to acknowledge the way I sur-vive; I carry on; I persist in living and through such acknowledgement, to manage my ontological encumbrance and, at last, turn to her.

---

<sup>18</sup> Guenther, “Shame and the Temporality of Social Life,” 38.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Je suis en guerre contre moi-même,” *Le Monde*, August 18, 2004. For a commentary on this notion, see Judith Butler, “On Never Having Learned How to Live,” *Differences* 16, no. 3 (2005): 30.

This turning, this small ethical step did not therefore rely on “a moral” or “a set of precepts,” but on the way I simply sur-vive, that is, *I manage to carry on with my usurping body, with my unbearable self-encumbrance*. Sur-vival as a turning to the other. This turning to the other was untainted by egotistical acts of generosity, solidarity, or fraternity; it was the gesture of lessening the impact of my presence onto her. I was ashamed. In discovering this, I realized that my simple presence bore upon her. I occupied her space and time. I took food from her mouth. I could only do this. I could only be this murderous body. But if I accepted this, I could then begin *to curve down the violence I inflicted upon her*. Not by starving myself to death, but by acknowledging the space and time I took—from her and from all others.<sup>20</sup> This was *the least* I could do, which was also *the first thing to do*. Beyond normative morality, this was indeed the real start of ethics.

Shame was therefore a structure of intersubjectivity that curiously and most remarkably posited an ethical gesture that trumped all moral orders and precepts. As an “intentionality in reverse,” shame opened up a form of ethics that was basically one of radical responsibility. This responsibility was not the state or fact of having a duty to the other because a duty was another form of violent moral economy. No, responsibility was basically here a paradoxical primary *response* to the other: it stood for the moment when I finally expressed—however surprising this was—a solidarity *not* to my being, but *to my very own cumbersomeness* and that such solidarity was precisely what allowed me to begin living ethically, that is, in this case, to finally hear my Rwandese counterpart *properly*. To recognize my reversal was to acknowledge that, by simply being, someone could be affected and that I therefore have a solidarity toward my murderous body, a solidarity that also paradoxically curved down the potential harm done toward her. I reverse; I can only get out of the carpet, but cautiously, in solidarity *not* to her, but to my

---

<sup>20</sup> Obviously, here one should launch an analysis of the issue of our environmental impact on the world. Unfortunately, there is no space to develop this here. The point is simply that curving down our carbon footprint, for example, is already an attempt to hear the other, to participate in the world as subject. I can only leave this immense topic for another time.

very own cumbersomeness. Is this not precisely ethics *without the violence of the judging gaze*; ethics *without the duplicitous open hand*; ethics *without economy and morality*?

The above was a personal account of shame. But what of collective shame? I need now to shift tense and style. I have to admit of having no competence in addressing the socio-political idea of collective shame. However, if I accept the idea of shame as an “intentionality in reverse” and that the premise of ethics is the acknowledgement of usurping the whole world for unjustly occupying space and time, then who is to say that this shame and therefore this acknowledgement cannot also be collective? If I stay with Rwanda, there is no doubt that some French people (albeit a few ... ) experience (even to this day) a mortifying shame when they think of the role of France in the genocide of 1994. The usual response to this shame is to create groups, movements, associations, charities, and websites to fight against France’s hypocrisy and amnesia. These are effective, but only up to a point. If I stay outside of the economy of morality and focus on the “intentionality in reverse” that I am putting forward in this essay, then a different type of demand unfolds onto the French, but also onto everyone else. It demands a solidarity *not just* to our cumbersomeness, but *also* to the cumbersomeness of the whole world as a collective subject.<sup>21</sup> This solidarity is a mutual recognition of usurpation, a solidarity that gives priority to our subject-world over and above the subject understood in its individuality. My mortifying shame is the shame of *all of us* (French or not), and such recognition is an attempt to respond to the other, the Rwandese, the survivor, the victim and therefore to our world as subject.

The above was also a rather modest experience of shame. But what of an unbearable collective shame? To be ashamed of not knowing much about the Rwandan genocide was to some extent excusable. I was ashamed, I expressed solidarity to my cumbersomeness and in doing so, I took it upon myself to finally respond, to take on the *responsibility* of tending an ear to a

---

<sup>21</sup> For an analysis of this world-subject, see Jean-Paul Martinon, “Im-Mundus or Nancy’s Globalizing-World-Formation,” in *Nancy and the Political*, ed. Sanja Dejanovic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

Rwandese. This reveals shame as a crucial structure of intersubjectivity leading to ethics, but that's all. Now imagine the shame of being part of a genocide. I can only use here the verb "to imagine" because I cannot possibly put myself in the shoes of those Rwandese who survived the genocide. Every year Rwanda commemorates the anniversary of the genocide. In April each year, the most brutal and unbearable shame descends on millions of men and women who survived the genocide. I cannot imagine what this must feel like: to survive one's relatives, to not have disappeared with them six feet under. It's too much. Their shame and therefore their conscience must surely be of another order. No one can understand it; no one can articulate it. To do so would be to violently impose our point of view, to ruthlessly overtake their shame and their conscience.<sup>22</sup>

No, the only gesture possible is to keep quiet and silent for their shame is beyond compare. Silent, our task can only be to simply listen to their extraordinary conscience. As you can imagine, this conscience has nothing to do with the way they consciously and bravely deal with the morass of moral dilemmas they have had to face since 1994. Rwanda spends its time weighing the type of moral issues that would defy any normative ethics and as such can only be left willy-nilly to those in power and to those who put them in power. No, this conscience is much more subtle. It is their unique attempt to turn the most unbearable shame, the most extreme form of "intentionality in reverse" into a gesture that lessens the impact of their lives on others. They had to carry on; they had to survive and in doing so, they managed to get by and live together again.

In order to make the world understand the difficulty of this survival, the president of the Representative Council of French Jewry, Richard Prasquier, uses the following comparison: "Can one imagine a survivor from Auschwitz having to live after the war in the same village where the Camp's SS also

---

<sup>22</sup> For an analysis of the problematic of taking western analytical and/or scientific tools (anthropological, sociological, therapeutic, etc) to analyse Rwanda, see the introduction to Martinon, *After "Rwanda," In Search of a New Ethics*.

live?”<sup>23</sup> Rwanda is indeed Israel reborn at the heart of Germany after the Second World War. Such an unbearable situation means they have had to sur-vive in close proximity to one another, killers and survivors, each and every one of them negotiating—no doubt with much difficulty—their fragile place in the sun. This unique sur-vival in history is the greatest lesson Rwanda offers the world. It reveals the most accomplished attempt at lessening the impact of their presence on one another, that is, of their “intentionality in reverse.” It reveals Rwandese as the rare bearers of a radical ethical life: solidarity toward their own self-encumbrance. As such, it is high time we hear them for our normative morals are clearly failing us.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. London: Zone Books, 1999.

Butler, Judith. “On Never Having Learned How to Live.” *Differences* 16, no. 3: 27–34.

—. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

Critchley, Simon. “Foreword.” In Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, 161–62. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Derrida, Jacques. “Je suis en guerre contre moi-même,” *Le Monde*, August, 18, 2004, unpaginated.

—. “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.” In *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, 97–192. London: Routledge, 2001.

---

<sup>23</sup> Richard Prasquier, “De la Shoah au génocide des Tutsis: face à la concurrence des memoires?,” in *Rwanda, Pour un dialogue des memoires*, ed. Benjamin Abtan (Paris: Albin Michel and Union des Etudiants Juifs de France, 2007), 94 (my translation).

Guenther, Lisa. *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*. New York: SUNY, 2006.

—. “Shame and the Temporality of Social Life.” In *Continental Philosophical Review* 44, no. 1 (2011): 23–39. doi: 10.1007/s11007-011-9164-y.

Levi, Primo. *If This Is a Man*, translated by Stuart Woolf. London: Abacus, 1991.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre Nous*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. London: Continuum, 2006.

—. “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas.” In *The Provocations of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, translated by Andrew Benjamin and Tamara Wright. Edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, 168–80. London: Routledge, 1988.

—. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesnes University Press, 1969.

Martinon, Jean-Paul. *After “Rwanda”: In Search of a New Ethics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013.

—. “Im-Mundus or Nancy’s Globalizing-World-Formation.” In *Nancy and the Political*, edited by Sanja Dejanovic. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

—. *The End of Man*. New York: Punctum Books, 2013.

—. “Time Unshackled.” In *New Formations*, 2015, forthcoming.

Prasquier, Richard. “De la Shoah au génocide des Tutsis: face à la concurrence des memoires?” In *Rwanda, Pour un dialogue des memoires*,



edited by Benjamin Abtan, 89–104. Paris: Albin Michel and Union des Etudiants Juifs de France, 2007.

Rolland, Jacques. "Annotation." In Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, translated by Jacques Rolland, 74–94. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes. London: Routledge, 2003.