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## FAILURE OF MORALITY

*The principal thesis of this article is to see Levinas' philosophy as an attempt to protest against the goodness of health and the undiscussable value of self-control and the notions associated with it – freedom, heroism, and resoluteness. It's based on the analysis of principle ethical and philosophical conceptions such as Socrates, Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger.*

**Keywords:** morality, ethics, sin, goodness, Levinas.

Levinas starts his seminal work *Totality and Infinity* with the statement “Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality” [7, p. 21]. The concern that Levinas expresses is one of the oldest philosophical concerns. In our paper we will try to examine the urgency and the meaning of this concern. Following Levinas' question and the development of his discourse, we have to consent that we are not better off after Levinas' ethics as first philosophy. We are still duped by morality. We are still the victims of ethics. To the question of whether this means that Levinas' philosophy suffers a failure, we have to answer ‘yes’. However, with this answer we are invited to realize that Levinas' philosophy calls for the reevaluation of failure, being duped, and being a victim. In our paper we will try to indicate the directions for this reevaluation.

To approach this reevaluation we will start with Socrates' concern not to be duped by morality. In the first book of the *Republic* Socrates is challenged by Thrasymachus' argument: ‘the just is the advantage of the stronger’ [10, p. 15]. Thrasymachus' argument, as well as Glaucon's later in the book, is motivated by the desire to escape the hypocrisy of moralists, to not be duped by them.

Faced with Thrasymachus' argument, Socrates finds himself in a difficult situation. He cannot answer Thrasymachus straightforwardly, as Thrasymachus demands, without contradicting himself. Socrates has to prove that it is advantageous to be just (or, at least, that it is reasonable) without admitting that one is just for a certain reason, in view of one's advantages. As an advocate of reason, Socrates cannot accept the situation that there is no reason to be moral. If the demand to be moral is not supported by reason one is duped by morality. But if one finds a reason to be moral, there is no morality. If one is moral only for a reason, the story of the ring of Gyges is a successful defense of Thrasymachus' argument.

In his retort to the argument that ‘justice is the advantage of the stronger,’ Socrates substitutes a demonstration that it is better to be just than unjust for a logical counter-argument and definition of what justice is. Without really opposing Thrasymachus, Socrates constructs, as if self-evident, an equation

between health, happiness, reason, and justice on the one hand and sickness, wretchedness, and injustice on the other hand. His demonstration is grounded in the assumptions that justice produces unity and harmony of the soul, and unity and harmony mean healthiness. For Socrates of the *Republic*, as well as for Socrates of the *Apology*, the statement that ‘everybody wants to be healthy’ is unarguable. As a result of this understanding we find at the end of the first book of the *Republic* Socrates’ conclusion that justice that produces the health of the soul is better than injustice that produces sickness of the soul. Socrates wins his argument by making Thrasymachus appear stupid since Thrasymachus, by relying on his understanding of justice, chooses to be wretched rather than healthy and happy.

In this argument as in many others, Socrates substitutes health for happiness. By this substitution he is able to demonstrate Thrasymachus’ basic mistake, which does not lie in his sincere opposition to the hypocrisy of the preachers of morality (whom Socrates also cannot accept, not being as naïve as Thrasymachus thinks) but in his blindness to the complexity of the human soul and in his confusion of the advantages of the body with the advantages of the soul.

Socrates tries to clarify the meaning of advantages by drawing a distinction between fake advantages and real advantages. He is able to produce this distinction by speaking about them from the perspective of health as the highest end. Thrasymachus bases his definition of justice on the idea of bodily strength and health. Socrates, through his construction of the healthy city, demonstrates that health as such is impossible for the body. Bodily health is an illusion, a copy of the real health that is possible only for the soul. The body is always bound for becoming and therefore always in a more or less in corrupt state.

After the completion of the architectonic of the soul, Socrates is able to clarify what it means to be healthy as well as to offer some prescriptions. Health is only possible when the rational part is healthy and virtuous and controls desires with the help of temperance. The principle axioms of western philosophy – ‘control yourself’, the superiority of unity over disunity, and the necessity to be free in order to be responsible – are affirmed here. Socrates, with the postulation of these principle axioms, is able to outwit the preachers of morality – poets and politicians. With mockery he exposes their failure to hoodwink him. By separating real health, eternal soul health, from illusory health, temporary bodily health, one can save morality without succumbing to the preachers of morality. Thus Socrates produces the equation reason-virtue-happiness-health-control that will dominate western philosophy. But perhaps with the constitution of these axioms Socrates duped not only Thrasymachus and Glaucon, but

himself and all his followers.

In western philosophy since Socrates it is probably only in Kant that we can see a sincere reservation in accepting Socrates’ postulate that controlling reason produces health and unity. In a bold move, Kant rigorously separates the noumenal from the phenomenal and demonstrates that reason can make one sicker, more miserable. However, Kant, although he does not accept the idea that health is good without qualification, cannot completely abandon the division on sickness and health. This division compels him, as if in excuse for his rebellion against the tradition of the superiority of health, to accept the notion that if there is no health/happiness there is no point to live. Morality makes us worthy of health, and Kant intimates by negative arguments that one who is not worthy of being healthy cannot really be healthy [3, p. 7-10].

Kant’s grounding of morality in self-legislative egoity brings to focus what was already at stake in the opposition between Socrates and Thrasymachus – the ego and the realization of its interests through proper control. Kant demonstrates that despite the apparent opposition between Socrates and Thrasymachus they share the same structure with regard to the ego’s advantages. In both cases the ego’s goals and objectives come from outside. Thrasymachus, Socrates, and Kant demand freedom for the ego and think that the ego’s freedom can only be realized through the ego’s mastery. The difference between them is that Thrasymachus understands freedom as mastery over the other, Socrates finds freedom in mastery over the instincts, and Kant thinks that freedom is only possible as self-legislation. Kant’s radical reworking of the Socratic formula of morality – ‘control yourself’ – and the divorce of happiness/health and morality make Thrasymachus’ concern for the motivation for morality more pressing.

Nietzsche, accepting Kant’s divorce of morality and health in the revaluation of the notion of health, exposes Socrates’ equation of reason, happiness, virtue, and health to mockery. He demonstrates that the equation itself which is offered by Socrates as medicine is testimony to Socrates’ sickness. Socrates’ greatness for Nietzsche is Socrates’ realization of his degeneration – Socrates knows that he is a cave full of vices, of diseases, but he cures his diseases by suppressing them [9, p. 15-16]. As Nietzsche notices, the offered cure turned out to be more dangerous than the disease itself. Philosophy has to stop its pretension of being medicine. Socrates already intimates that the philosopher is not a real physician (and probably the following generations of philosophers were duped, and duped others, by assuming the role of real doctors). A philosopher only prepares the way for the real physician – the fantastic transcendental realm (in Socrates’ case, death).

Nietzsche reveals what is concealed in Socrates' therapy. Pressed by Thrasymachus and in the absence of a physician (death, which is the only possible physician when to live is to be in constant deficiency, is always absent), Socrates offers the singular, anti-natural reversal that initiates philosophy as a 'medicine' – an art of suppression. (Kant does not leave this ground; he only develops the idea of self-control as the prescription for morality the condition to be healthy/happy.) Nietzsche reveals the phantasm of Socrates' understanding of healthiness and strength, which is produced by the negation of Thrasymachus' spirit. But Thrasymachus himself does not represent a healthy spirit. He is already too shaky on his legs, a rhetor, one who is looking for support from his audience, from Socrates, one who is only able to negate and who needs Socrates to be able to say 'yes' [9, p. 12]. Thrasymachus' 'yes' resembles rather the braying 'yes' of an 'ass.' Nietzsche's healthiness, his 'yes' to life, does not lie in looking for the advantage, which calls for transcendentalism and postulating values, but in being resolute. Nietzsche's revaluation of the approach to and structure of morality in some sense continues where Kant leaves off. Beginning with the divorce of morality from health, the art of postulating values from being healthy, he declares the anti-naturalness, the sickness and failure, of the art of postulating values (which is essentially a Socratic act). One is not healthy because one is right; one is right because one is healthy – the supremacy of impulses over values [9, p. 30-32].

Despite Nietzsche's radical revaluation of the health-sickness opposition, he preserves the opposition and the urgent necessity for becoming healthier. Despite his revaluation of Socratic wisdom, Nietzsche is as if duped when he accepts Socrates' assumption that being healthy is better than being sick. In 'beyond good and evil' the good remains under the mask of getting stronger and healthier, of gaining control of one's destiny [8, p. 4]. Nietzsche, after all, makes the equation of good and health the basic equation of his genealogy, albeit with a drastic revaluation of the notion of health. As we have said, he mocks only a part of the Socratic equation: reason-health-happiness-virtue, leaving untouched the remaining part: control. The unarguable value of self-mastery, freedom, heroism and resoluteness is maintained in control. Nietzsche, philosophizing after the death of God (the realm of the absolute health), manages to salvage health itself. In the time of decadence he finds health in being resolute. Later, Heidegger will develop this resoluteness as the central thesis of his philosophy – to be authentic.

The principal thesis of our work is to see Levinas' philosophy as an attempt to protest against the goodness of health and the undiscussable value of control and the notions associated with it – freedom, heroism, and resoluteness. He is with Nietzsche in the revaluation of health, but he, as if going against

himself (against *conatus-essendi*), invokes the sickness of infinity. For Levinas God is rather sick than dead (if there is God). Maybe it is only in Levinas that we can see a real rebellion against the Socratic onto-theological tradition (the origin of which we see through the demand for mastery), against the supremacy of the heroic goodness-success-resoluteness equation, a rebellion guided by the necessity to oppose Heidegger without returning to a pre-heideggerian way of philosophizing [4, p. 4].

Levinas' opposition to the basic division on being and nothingness (the distinction that is brought in focus by Heidegger as the reworking of Nietzsche's rejection of the division on the true and apparent world in the sixth thesis of *How the "True World" Finally Became a Fiction* [9, p. 24]) returns the question of morality once again to Kant through Nietzsche, reading him after Heidegger, looking for the possibility of another way, or, for being otherwise, for not seeing man as if only between being and nothingness. For Levinas there is no morality in this stretching between being and nothingness. In his philosophy, Levinas as if step by step objects to Socrates' objection to Thrasymachus without, however, agreeing with Thrasymachus, but keeping in mind his sincerity and his demand not to be duped by morality.

Socrates is right demonstrating to Thrasymachus that desires, always structurally disastrous, bring one's failure. Thrasymachus fails. But failure as well as victory, as Levinas argues, can be regarded in different ways if already at the beginning we understand desire positively not as initiated out of lack but as a desire for out of fullness. Victory as it is conceived by society is always a victory of the survivor, an arguable ideological victory. Victory is constituted as a suppression and negation across a fantastic historical projection. Failure is understood by opposition to victory. But failure can be understood not only in a nihilistic way, against victory, from the perspective of the survivor. It can be understood as Levinas tries to demonstrate in *Totality and Infinity*, and especially in *Otherwise than Being*, as a substitution that can be expressed in the formula "I am guilty before everybody else". To fail is to accept across diachrony in passivity, without claiming control at the moment of accepting – responsibility in the passive voice [6, p. 99-131].

Through Levinas' reexamination of the notions of desire and failure comes the reexamination of the meaning and value of self-control and mastery [7, p. 34-35]. Self-control and mastery since Socrates produce health (or condition health as for Kant). To be healthy is to be in control of the self. Self-control is manifested as being in possession of one's own mind (in this respect Freud's vacillations in defining sickness are especially revealing). Or, as Nietzsche demonstrates, to be 'healthy' is to suppress the tyranny of the instincts by the tyranny of reason. For Nietzsche this suppression does not constitute health, and Socrates – 'a

brilliant outwiter’– knew it. This suppression only demonstrates the contradictory character of the binary sickness/health structure. The source of sickness is life. To heal is to eliminate the source of sickness. Socrates, who is not a physician (his followers misunderstood him in turning philosophy into medicine), knows it and offers a temporary suspension of sickness – the suppression of instincts and impulses by established values [9, p. 22]). But if this structure is correct, one is a scoundrel and duped by morality as Levinas tries to show.

With the divorce of responsibility from control, mastery, and freedom a new possibility for understanding morality arises, one outside the freedom/non-freedom opposition (which still governs and limits Kant’s freedom); responsibility *as if* failure, a failure that cannot be transformed into glory, into ‘spiritual’ or ‘transcendental’ heroism. Any such transformation turns morality into a bargain, preaching self-negation but ending by possessing the world.

Starting with the demand not to be duped by morality, Levinas comes in his reading of western philosophy to a simple alternative: either we are duped by morality and must commit ourselves to hypocrisy, the essential meaning of which is to anesthetize our sick existence, or we must accept the unacceptable – responsibility in the passive voice – in such a way that to be is to be sick by the other. Any act of morality is sick. Thrasymachus is right: there is no reason to be just. And one cannot escape the obviousness of Glaucon’s example. However, after Levinas one can hear the story of the invisible ring otherwise.

Glaucon’s story is bent by Socrates’ interpretation in the direction of reason and interest. The ostensible conclusion from Glaucon’s story is that if there is no reason, there is no interest in being moral. Socrates proves that there is a reason to be moral. To be reasonable is to have an interest, but there is a hierarchy of interests. The interests that Glaucon advocates are fake. One has to aspire to the real interests that are disclosed in the light of Good. But the story can be heard slightly differently. It can be objected on grounds besides that offered by Socrates.

But we must ask what is disclosed by Glaucon’s improbable invisibility, and whether invisibility as such is possible. It seems that Glaucon demonstrates that one who is free from all consequences does not act morally. One acts morally only under compulsion. Kant’s categorical imperative is a fine reshaping of Glaucon’s argument – only when one disregards consequences and motivations in acting according to duty is one moral. Only when one is free is one moral. Morality is conditioned by invisibility. Morality is subordinated to freedom and invisibility. But such reshaping can only be accepted if one accepts that there is morality. It seems that Glaucon’s story provides support for such an acceptance. The honest shepherd in the story seduces the queen and kills

the king. He commits crime, and we can see his actions as a seduction and murder only if he already recognizes morality. If there is no morality that as precedes the shepherd’s murder there is no a murder. By the logic of Descartes’ third meditation the criminal act of the shepherd spells out the presence of God. However, at the same time it questions the possibility for invisibility and makes the possibility of Kant’s categorical imperative suspicious.

With Kant’s reshaping Glaucon’s story gains a new significance. Morality is conditioned by invisibility. Morality is understood not from the perspective of the hierarchy of interests, as for Plato, but as a complete disinterestedness. But we already *thrown* in the world, and there is no way to escape Being. To be in Being is to be interested. “*Esse is itneresse*; essence is interest” [6, p. 4].

For Heidegger after the death of God man is defined in perspective of his mortality. To be is to be mortal, to be is to be to death, where death is the outmost possibility. Glaucon’s story gains a new significance. For Heidegger the impossibility of invisibility becomes the possibility of death. To be mortal is to be invisible. To be is to be in control of one’s death. One who is authentic is in control, is not duped. Death that is always mine wipes away all traces of my actions, absolute freedom from all consequences. Freedom as an obedience to Being conditions morality.

Levinas objects to Heidegger most strongly on the possibility of death. His objection can sound like a playful reversal – death is not the possibility of impossibility, but the impossibility of possibility<sup>1</sup>. Behind this playful reversal is an attempt to rethink the western metaphysics that finds its culmination in Heidegger, metaphysics that always subordinates justice to freedom, which is understood as more control. One, as Levinas argues, cannot die. Death is not in one’s control. One cannot escape existence (the murmur of *il y a*) [4] in death.

We cannot present in this paper the complete itinerary of this reversal; we merely trace it, keeping in mind Glaucon’s concern. For Levinas, for whom the invisibility of death is impossible, invisibility is possible as enjoyment<sup>2</sup>. One starts in enjoyment. In itself, in enjoyment I am separated and happy, invisible. To be invisible is to be a complete atheist – to be separated from universal history and from God [7, p. 62-63]. One who is invisible does not need to kill a king. He is happy in his separation. Everything is already his. I enjoy my cup of tea and the rest of the world is outside of my interest, according to Dostoevsky’s underground man’s testimony. *I am* in this enjoyment. In this being I enjoy my own toothache. One does not live for happiness. One lives happiness.

From this understanding of a totally separated being there is the possibility to have a desire for infinity that does not arise out of lack, like Plato’s negative pleasure. At home in self (*chez soi*) I am happy. At home there is a possibility of welcoming. Home is welcoming. The home in which I am in becomes a home

through welcoming. The Heideggerian ‘in’ of ‘*in-the-world*’ [2, p. 78-86] is transformed as being at home [7, p. 152-168]. For Heidegger the world in which I am thrown is not opened by welcoming, but disclosing. The ‘*In-the-world*’ Being in which I am is disclosed to me in my rooting myself in this Being. But if at the beginning I am the being of enjoyment in myself there is a different structure and possibility. In welcoming at home (*chez soi*) the Other comes – one that is destitute and needs a place to stay, but is not humiliated by my pity (as Nietzsche demonstrates in the *Antichrist*). This welcoming of the Other (desire for the Other) breaks the ontological totality of interests. Morality is this breaking of totality.

In the heteronymous positing of knowledge Levinas separates himself from the tradition that sought to posit the foundation of self in self, for which heteronomy is violence and opinion. But in existence in itself there is an opening for the Other, an opening that is only possible as welcoming. ‘*In*’ in the world refers not to ‘*inn*’ (as for Heidegger), but to inviting. In inviting I am putting into question not an idea or a concept, but myself. ‘To be in’ is to invite. To invite is to ‘fail’ from the perspective of western philosophy - to recognize my insufficiency, to limit my freedom. But, as Levinas argues, the welcoming of the Other does not clash with freedom but invests it. It opens my home. Its opening is in inviting. My home is not an inn. It is a place of welcoming. The freedom of being at home (*chez soi*) (in oneself, in the world) is the freedom of a host who is a host not by controlling a situation, but by offering a place to stay for a guest. The walls make the house that shelters me from the outside elements in the midst of my enjoyment, preserving my invisibility. But home does not ground me in security. The door of the home opens the ambiguity of my existence. The shut door that keeps the Other away opens the home for welcoming. I am at home by opening the door to a stranger. Opening the door transforms my invisibility in enjoyment and makes reasoning possible by calling into question my freedom in the call that comes from the Other. My responsibility for the other conditions freedom and reason.

From the perspective of the theo-ontological approach in which morality is subordinated to freedom: 1) it is most important in order to be moral not to be duped; 2) not to be duped is already to know, to know is to be in control; 3) to be in control is to not be moral. There is no escape from the vicious circularity initiated by the concern for morality. In Levinas, however, since his book on escape, there is the possibility for the opening of a new mode that goes against the privileged position of health, against *conatus essendi*. To be moral is not to be duped by reason since reason issues from morality which is in shame for one’s invisibility in enjoyment. At home with oneself there is an opening in

welcoming as the condition of ontological possibility. This opening is counterwise to the theoretical direction of intentionality, despite accepting the finality of time, the essence of which is in ageing and sickening. In this opening my home is not a neutral inn but sooner a hospital in which the Other – destitute and sick – is invited. We can agree with Nietzsche that the world is a hospital, but understanding ‘hospital’ in its ambiguity. It is not only the place of pity and the manifestation of *ressentiment*, but a place of hospitality. The invited Other is sick and we have to attend to him as a sick person. But there is no dialectical interplay of master-slave relationship that Nietzsche despises. I am not a host by being a master of my domain deriving my mastery from pitying the Other. I am a host by serving to the other. I am not better than the other. My responsibility is a ‘sick’ responsibility, recognizing my deficiency in shame<sup>3</sup> for my freedom.

‘Not to be duped’ has been understood since Socrates through the mode of self-control and possession, the mode in which language is always already an excuse and an attempt to justify one’s position. Levinas’ concern regarding being duped addresses a mode in which the opposition of good and evil is suspended neither by withdrawing nor going beyond, but by *my* responsibility which I have not chosen and which I do not control.

Only in the spiteful mode introduced by Levinas, in which one is chosen an-archically, can we speak about responsibility that is not limited by freedom, which is determined by mastery and control (understood in many different ways by the philosophers) – a scandalous limitation from the perspective of which one, if he is clever enough, is never guilty. For Levinas, not to be duped does not mean to be in control but signifies otherwise than being, which means first of all to go against one’s own *conatus* to “expand oneself freely” [6, p. 99]. If in Kant one’s morality is disclosed in one’s misery, in Levinas one’s morality is misery and sickness but understood otherwise.

Following the inversion offered by Levinas and thus seeing one’s heroic controlling position as base and immoral, we start with ‘being responsible’ not in the active voice of ‘being able’ – the responsibility that begins with the conquering ‘I can’ (and fulfilled in my control of my death) – but in the passive voice as being called to respond *an-archically*, where ‘being responsible’ precedes my power to assume, precedes the possibility to make excuses or offer explanations. In this call one is exposed before the beginning as wounded and sickened by the other. The ego does not begin in the grounding of ‘I think’, constructing the world from the perspective of its autonomy, but as ‘I am sick’, in a sickness that cannot be recaptured and diagnosed, that is the primal mode of existence. This sickness should be understood from the invisibility of enjoyment not as a failure of my happiness, but as my responsibility for the

failure of the other's happiness.

We read 'I am sick' as 'I am guilty before everybody else' – the phrase that becomes the formula of Levinas' ethics [5, p. 100, 133, 161]. From the perspective of the phrase 'I am guilty before everybody else' one does not begin in autonomy, control, or one's own most possibility, but in being called to respond as guilty before one has the freedom to respond, where freedom itself must be reinterpreted as the freedom to spend oneself freely for the Other. From this perspective 'not to be duped' does not mean proudly maintaining oneself in Being, in the self-exculpating position of "I can" opposing nothingness, but as escaping the totalizing work of being (*il y a*), which succumbs everything to interest, in the passivity of responsibility.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> We rely upon Simon Critchley's detailed analysis of Levinas' objection to Heidegger's understanding of death. See: [1].

<sup>2</sup> The invisibility of enjoyment is established at home with oneself as the invisibility of the unseen. One enjoys oneself in the mode of "*apres nous le deluge*". There is another mode of invisibility for Levinas – the impossible mode of desire for infinity. It seems that the itinerary of Levinas' saying is spread between these two modes.

<sup>3</sup> There is a question about the source of this shame that we would like to address, but it cannot be done in this short paper.

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#### ВІДСУТНІСТЬ МОРАЛЬНОСТІ

*Основна теза цієї статті є те, щоб побачити філософію Левінаса як спробу опротестувати статус здоров'я як блага і нідискусіністськості самоконтролю і понять, пов'язаних з ним - свободою, героїзмом і рішучістю. Дослідження засновано на аналізі основних етичних і філософських концепцій, таких як Сократа, Канта, Ніцше та Гейдеггера.*

**Ключові слова:** мораль, етика, гріх, доброта, Левінаса.

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#### ОТСУТСТВИЕ ПРАВСТВЕННОСТИ

*Главный тезис этой статьи состоит в том, чтобы увидеть философию Левинаса как попытку выразить протест против понимания здоровья как блага и непредубежденной ценности самоконтроля и связанных с ним понятий - свободы, героизма и решительности. Исследование основано на анализе принципиальных этических и философских концепций, таких как Сократа, Канта, Ницше и Хайдеггера.*

**Ключевые слова:** мораль, этика, грех, доброта, Левинаса.