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God Below: A Faith Born in Hell—Life and Fate and the Otherwise Than Being

Karl Shankar SenGupta

Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX 75080, USA; Karl.SenGupta@utdallas.edu

Abstract: This essay examines the idea of kenosis and holy folly in the years before, during, and after the Holocaust. The primary focus will be Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, though it also will touch upon Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons* and the ethics of the Lithuanian-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, speaking to their intersecting ideas. Dostoevsky, true enough, predates the Shoah, whereas Grossman was a Soviet Jew who served as a journalist (most famously at the Battle of Stalingrad), and Levinas was a soldier in the French army, captured by the Nazis and placed in a POW camp. Each of these writers wrestles with the problem of evil in various ways, Dostoevsky and Levinas as theists—one Christian, the other Jewish—and Grossman as an atheist; yet, despite their differences, there are ever deeper resonances in that all are drawn to the idea of kenosis and the holy fool, and each writer employs variations of this idea in their respective answers to the problem of evil. Each argues, more or less, that evil arises in totalizing utopian thought which reifies individual humans to abstractions—to The Human, and goodness to The Good. Each looks to kenosis as the "antidote" to this utopian reification.

Keywords: Vasily Grossman; Levinas; Dostoevsky; kenosis; holy fool; totalitarianism; ethics; Communism; Fascism; Holocaust

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> "My faith has emerged from the flames of the crematoria, from the concrete of the gas chamber."
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> —Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*

Is it possible to speak of ethics after the Shoah, or do we deceive ourselves when we refer to actions as "good" or "evil"? And, in a related vein, what of faith? Is Biblical theism even a possibility in the wake of Auschwitz, or is it an archaism, a bad joke, even?

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) ranks among the foremost post-Holocaust ethicists, and despite losing his family in Lithuania to the Nazi onslaught, he remains immovably grounded in Judaism (as Richard A. Cohen, e.g., argues in texts like *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*). Levinas' entire corpus might be imagined as a resounding *No* to the guard's brutal "There is no why here" in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (Levi 1986, p. 29). Two crucial influences on Levinas, it is worth noting, are the Russian writers Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) and Vasily Grossman (1905–1964). The three represent a profound cross-pollination of literature, philosophy, and faith. Levinas himself relates in an interview with François Poirié that it was his readings in Russian authors like "Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky, above all Dostoevsky" that laid the foundation for his work in philosophy and ethics (Robbins 2001, p. 28). In this same interview, Levinas also acknowledges his debt to Grossman's *Life and Fate*, which, despite the horrors to which it attests, offers hope in the possibility of "goodness without a regime, the miracle of goodness" (Levinas 1998, pp. 80–81).

Grossman's work is the prime focus of this essay, which concerns literature of the Holocaust; yet it must be stressed that his work simultaneously harkens back to Dostoevsky and points ahead to Levinas, primarily in terms of their affirmation of ethics—specifically,

kenotic ethics, which is grounded in Biblical theism and embodies a self-emptying undertaken for the good of the Other. Grossman and Levinas lost family to the Holocaust, and each witnessed the war firsthand, Levinas as a soldier in the French army, Grossman as a front-line journalist. That they are able to affirm an idea like kenosis, associated as it is with holy folly and idiocy, seems uncanny. By examining certain scenes and characters in Grossman's *Life and Fate*, however, we will find that a kenotic ethic, or holy folly, may be the only hope left to humanity after the Shoah.

To be sure, Grossman's experiences as a Russian Jew in the Second World War left him profoundly skeptical of abstract talk of Goodness. "Few people ever attempt to define 'good'. What is 'good'? 'Good' for whom?...Is good eternal and constant? Or is yesterday's good today's vice, yesterday's evil today's good?" So muses the "holy fool" Ikonnikov in Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, a work commonly described as "Tolstoyan" in its scope and grandeur. As we have already intimated, however, there is another author to whom Grossman might more aptly be compared, and that is Dostoevsky. In many respects, *Life and Fate* is more closely related to *Demons* or *The Brothers Karamazov* than to *War and Peace*. This is borne out by the fact that while the Soviet authorities had only minor qualms about Tolstoy, Dostoevsky's works, including and in particular *Demons*, were deemed highly suspect owing to his rejection of utopian projects and their inevitable reification of flesh-and-blood human beings into The Human. (Or, as Emmanuel Levinas might say, of beings into Being, existents into Existence.) The infamous arrest of Grossman's *Life and Fate*—even down to the ribbons on which the manuscript was typed!—drives home the prophetic affinity of Dostoevsky and Grossman, which in turn provided inspiration for Levinas, whose own work—*Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* in particular—can in a very real sense be described as "prophetic", intellectually as well as ethically and spiritually.

The protagonist of *Life and Fate*, Viktor Shtrum, is typically seen as a stand-in for Grossman himself; their mutual love for science, their experiences as Jews, and their moral and psychological "deformation" by Soviet reductionism all tend to bear out this view. If there is a moral or spiritual heart of the novel, however, it is to be found in a brief but incredibly profound "manifesto" of sorts penned by a "holy fool" and "blancmange", Ikonnikov. The idea of the holy fool is grounded in the kenosis of Christ, and is given perhaps its profoundest expression by the Russian Orthodox religious tradition. As Pavel Florensky explains in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, the essence of kenosis "lies in the supralogical overcoming of the naked identity 'I = I' and in the going out of oneself" (Florensky 1997, p. 67). Much as Christ "emptied", "ravaged", and "humbled" himself in becoming incarnate (Philippians 2:7), the holy fool undertakes a similar emptying, "[depriving] itself of the attributes necessarily given and proper to it as well as of the natural laws of its inner activity according to the law of ontological egoism or identity." Florensky is quick to explain, moreover, that this self-emptying is not mere solipsistic mysticism but is undertaken "for the sake of the norm of another's being" (Florensky 1997, p. 67). In his "manifesto", Ikonnikov combines elements of definitional and narrative arguments to devastating effect: not only does he trace the history of the idea of goodness from antiquity to modernity and, along the way, provide penetrating criteria for his project; he also draws on his personal experience as a victim of both the Soviet and Nazi regimes in order to avoid becoming ensnared in mere abstraction. In this manner, he brilliantly utilizes logos, pathos, and ethos in equal measure and thereby remains inexorably grounded in the human.

It is necessary to examine Grossman's critique of utopian reification, or what Levinas might call the West's impulse to totality, in *Life and Fate*, including and in particular his "antidote" to said reification. This will be done through the "lens" of three key narratives within the novel—Shtrum's coercion by the authorities into signing a false accusation; a brief but telling debate between the Nazi Obersturmbannführer Liss and the Bolshevik Mikhail Sidorovich Mostovskoy about the uncomfortable similarities of their respective regimes; and Ikonnikov's aforementioned "manifesto". In the process, Grossman's connec-

tion to Dostoevsky is highlighted, as well as Grossman's profound influence on Levinas. Grossman and Levinas are Jews who never shed their Russianness, whilst Dostoevsky, fascinatingly, is a Russian more spiritually Jewish than he could have imagined: "Dostoevsky's art is prophetic precisely in the way it casts its ethical net ahead of the author himself, beyond his own fondness and prejudice—whether or not he is aware of it," writes Val Vinokur in *The Trace of Judaism* (Vinokur 2008, p. 34). That Dostoevsky's Alyosha, Vinokur continues, "resemble[s] one of the canny sages from Levinas's reading of Talmudic labor law as much as he resembles Myshkin, 'the Russian type'" ... suggests that "the Russian and Jewish traditions [represent] ... two intertwined, mutually sustaining modes of spiritual election, an election that can be only ethical, not ethnic" (Vinokur 2008, p. 59). This profound resonance, it will be seen, originates in the authors' shared attachment to the idea of kenosis, Saint Paul's term for Christ's self-emptying for the sake of mankind in Philippians 2:7—called alternatively "holy folly" (Dostoevsky and Levinas), or "senseless goodness" (Grossman and Levinas). Each writer points to kenosis as the only hope for ethics in the modern world.

In Yehiel De-Nur's (1917–2001) excruciating memoir, *Shivitti: A Vision*, the author recounts being transported in a truck one cold dawn "under the watchful eye of a yawning German". The realization of the ridiculous ease with which their roles could be reversed horrifies De-Nur. He recognizes in himself the guard's torpor, owing to the early hour and desire to be warm in bed on so chill a morning. They are interchangeable, like cogs in a system (De-Nur 1998, pp. 12–13). One is reminded of Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, wherein it is observed that the essence of violence consists in "making [individuals] play roles in which [they] no longer recognize themselves"—or Others, one might well add—by "reduc[ing them] to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknownst to themselves" (Levinas 2007c, p. 21). Like and unlike Levinas, De-Nur penetrates to the very heart of evil, and is overwhelmed by its pervasiveness. Yet despite the fact that Dostoevsky died in 1881, well before the advent of the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany, he, too, expresses a related insight in *Demons* when Shatov remarks to Stavrogin: "The nation is the body of God ... If a great nation does not believe that the truth is in it alone ... , if it does not believe that it alone is able and called to resurrect and save everyone with its truth, then ... at once it turns into ethnographic material and not a great nation" (Dostoevsky 1994, pp. 251–52). In the name of the One Truth (which is to say, the overarching -ism), the "great nation" essentializes its peoples, reducing them to the redeemable and the irredeemable, the useful and the disposable. The members of both categories, ironically, are essentially *its*, as Martin Buber would say, and deployed like forces. Should this surprise? The "It-world", the domain of totality, knows not freedom but caprice; and the capricious man, Buber maintains, may speak in terms of "destiny" or "teleology" or similarly exalted terminology, but all such talk "is merely an embellishment of and a sanction of his ability to use" (Buber 1996, p. 109). The majority of people, however, are completely unaware of the process.

Grossman beautifully illustrates this tendency throughout *Life and Fate*, as for instance in the relative ease with which Shtrum lends his signature to a document falsely condemning several other scientists. The irony of the incident is that Shtrum himself has only very recently returned to grace after being spuriously condemned. Immediately prior to the phone call from Soviet totalitarian Joseph Stalin wherein he is "forgiven", Shtrum is thinking to himself, of his own self: "He was a pitiful ignoramus ... He was of no use to anyone. Whether he repented or not, he was of equally little significance to the furious State" (Grossman 2006, p. 761). The State—the totality—has commandeered his thinking to such an extent that he forgets his own achievements and abilities and convictions. Ironically enough, this is borne out yet again in the wave of adulation he experiences after Stalin's call: "It needed only one word from Stalin for vast buildings to rise up ... for hundreds of thousands of men and women to dig canals, lay down roads ... A great State was embodied in him, in his character, in his mannerisms" (Grossman 2006, p. 766). Shtrum's life and work has meaning once more. And yet—recalling, not long after, his childhood

love for the stars, he has a sudden realization: "It was as though he was saying goodbye to that pure, childish, almost religious love of science and its magic . . . " (Grossman 2006, p. 768). Shtrum's feelings of wonder have been commandeered to serve the system, the institution: "That institutions yield no public life is felt by more and more human beings, to their sorrow," Buber declares in *I and Thou*: "this is the source of the distress and the search of our age" (Buber 1996, p. 94). The relational, with its focus on the why and the who, has been subsumed by the utilitarian, the how and the what. Nevertheless, Shtrum does his best to convince himself that *he* is the victor, that *he* has triumphed over Stalin, even recalling his prior refusal to confess; yet on some level, he realizes that his "salvation" merely confirms the power of the State, to which he is pleasantly in thrall—for the time being.

His attempts at self-delusion crumble, however, when he is asked to sign a condemnation of several scientists for a crime of which he knows they are innocent. Instead of being threatened directly, however, the State's tactics are on this occasion quite different: "The great State was breathing on him tenderly . . . He had no strength today, no strength at all. He was paralyzed [by] . . . a strange, agonizing sense of his own passivity" (Grossman 2006, p. 835). He signs the condemnation, acknowledging his status as a well-oiled cog, a bearer of the State's forces. It is not, however, a total defeat; Shtrum gains a valuable if excruciating insight: "Everything in the world is insignificant compared to the truth and purity of one small man—even the empire stretching from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean, even science itself . . . .Every hour, every day, year in, year out, he must struggle to be a man, struggle for his right to be pure and kind" (Grossman 2006, p. 841). In other words, he must struggle, to emulate the "stupid goodness" of an Ikonnikov.

In the foreword to his translation of *Demons*, Richard Pevear describes Dostoevsky's ultimate aim as a writer, which is of a piece with what might be termed his "kenotic aesthetic": to bestow upon his characters the space to genuinely be and grow and come in their own time—or not. (See Ruth Coates' *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* for more on Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky as a kenotic author, Chapter Six in particular.) In this same vein, Pevear further remarks that in *Demons*, Dostoevsky is prophesying against the totalizing -isms and 0asms which "possess", and thereby deform, an individual's humanity: "Ideas that deface or distort this 'authoritative image of a human being' in a person are indeed acting like demons, and are them" (Dostoevsky 1994, p. xix). Grossman's *Life and Fate*, likewise, makes a very similar point, focusing specifically upon the deformation of humanity inherent to Nazism and Communism alike. This revelation is borne out in multiple narratives throughout the work, possibly most overtly in the conversation between the Nazi Obersturmbannführer Liss and the Bolshevik Mikhail Sidorovich Mostovskoy. Mostovskoy and Ikonnikov, both deemed heterodox by the Soviets and accordingly dispossessed, are now prisoners of the Nazis. Mostovskoy assumes the worst when he is summoned to Liss' office in the middle of the night, but in fact, Liss desires only dialogue. The two men are theoreticians for their respective movements, and Liss is quick to stress their shared intellectual roots: "'You put Hegel aside and get working. Well, we've had to put Hegel aside too,'" he says, and not without a certain irony (Grossman 2006, p. 395). A little later on, he remarks on the similarities of Stalin and Hitler, how each serves as both teacher and pupil to the other: Each professes to be an Internationalist but is in fact a dedicated Nationalist, and each recognizes the need for a ruthless liquidation of any and all who stand in the way of his goals, whether politically or metaphysically: "'You must believe me,'" Liss almost pleads with his unwilling interlocutor. "'You've kept silent while I've been talking, but I know that I'm a mirror for you—a surgical mirror'" (Grossman 2006, pp. 402–3). "'What is the reason for our enmity?'" Liss inquires. "'There is no divide . . . In essence we are both the same—both one-party states. Our capitalists are not the masters. The State gives them the plan . . . Your state also outlines a plan and takes what is produced for itself'" (Grossman 2006, p. 401). Mostovskoy quickly recognizes that Liss is struggling with doubts about Nazism but resists their obvious connection—namely, that Liss' crisis of faith mirrors his own as a Communist.

> He was like a man afraid of an illness . . . who won't go near a doctor, tries not to notice his indispositions and avoids talking about sickness with anyone close to him. And then suddenly someone comes up to him and says: 'Say, have you ever had such and such a pain, especially in the mornings, usually after . . . ? Yes, yes . . . '" (Grossman 2006, p. 396)

The fact that both men exhibit symptoms of the same "illness" suggests that the malady is not a generalized, abstract doubt but an all-too specific doubt—a "traumatism"—which arises from some deep inner conviction that the actions undertaken by these "opposing" systems are identical: specifically, in terms of their inevitable reductionism of victims and perpetrators alike, as Liss proclaims: "'Two poles of one magnet. [. . .] 'If that wasn't the case, then this terrible war wouldn't be happening!'" (Grossman 2006, p. 397). This remark clarifies and deepens Liss' later assertion that "' . . . our victory will be your victory. And if you should conquer, then we shall perish only to live in your victory'" (p. 397). Liss' evident sincerity and, more telling, choice of Mostovskoy as both dialectical partner and confessor tends to bear out the veracity of his claims about their systems' shared metaphysical roots. Each man, it might be said in summary, is deformed by his respective -ism precisely insofar as he is robbed of his capacity to love his fellow humans. Their encounter intensifies the unease with which each is already wrestling. Ultimately, however, each refuses to act on the radical calling into question of the Self, inspired by the face of the Other, through which God, the Otherwise than Being, is able to speak. Because this "speech" is but a mere "trace" of the Divine, it is easily forgotten despite its initially "traumatizing" effect on the Self. And traumatic this encounter assuredly is, particularly in Mostovskoy's case: his excruciating self-doubt affords him an opportunity to experience what Levinas would call the "passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity" (Levinas 2007b, pp. 14–15). Aware that Liss' guilt as "the enemy" is in fact his own, presented with an obvious opportunity to assume Liss' guilt and to act against the reification of any totalizing -ism or -asm, Mostovskoy quashes the traumatism and flees deeper into his preferred mode of totality. (To put it slightly differently: Mostovskoy refuses the discourse Liss presents him. And discourse, Levinas would say, opens the door to a revelation of the other, "a traumatism of astonishment" (Levinas 2007c, p. 73) Instead he chooses to view Mostovskoy through the lens of totality, the essential mode of which is that of *war*.)

> It should be noted that at one point in Liss' and Mostovskoy's abortive dialogue, Liss presents Ikonnikov's manifesto to Mostovskoy. He then pronounces that, despite their relative unfamiliarity, he knew from the first that Mostovskoy, good Bolshevik that he is, would have elicited the same "disgust" at such "rubbish". (Grossman 2006, p. 398)

What, exactly, is so repellant to Liss and Mostovskoy about Ikonnikov's ideas?

Ikonnikov begins, as shown earlier, by addressing the ambiguities attendant to defining goodness, whether historically, religiously, philosophically, scientifically, and/or politically. At the very root of his critique, however, lie the teachings of Jesus: "Never before had humanity heard such words" (Grossman 2006, p. 405). Despite Jesus' injunction to "Love your enemies'" (with all that that command entails), however, the behaviors of the historical catholic Christian Church, including the Crusades and the Inquisitions, seem to suggest Jesus' failure as the founder of a new religion, which proved no better than any of its antecedents or successors.

The reader cannot but experience a profound pathos as Ikonnikov recounts his spiritual journey during the course of his manifesto, which deepens its relatability and credibility: "What does a woman who has lost her children care about a philosopher's definitions of good and evil?" he asks as he surveys various philosophical ideas of goodness, a quiet anguish permeating his every word (Grossman 2006, p. 406). He speaks with similar bleakness of the political good, noting the initial idealism of the Communists: "This idea

was something fine and noble—yet it killed some without mercy, crippled the lives of others, and separated wives from husbands and children from fathers" (p. 407). He turns then to Fascism: "The sky has turned black; the sun has been extinguished by the smoke of the gas ovens. And even these crimes . . . have been committed in the name of good" (p. 407). He confesses that, for a time, he followed the Romantics and their quasi-pantheism, seeking goodness, à la Wordsworth, "in the silent kingdom of the trees", but in vain: "Only the blind conceive of the kingdom of trees and grass as the world of good . . . Is it that life itself is evil?" (p. 407). This last question, repeated several times throughout the manifesto, is devastating in its sincerity and anguish. Ikonnikov's careful reasoning is no mere abstraction or theorizing but is grounded in the real experience of evil: "My faith has been tempered in Hell" (p. 410). Nor is this an attempt at theodicy, i.e., a theological project to "com-prehend" the victim and her or his suffering, thereby re-victimizing the individual in the process: "Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is com-prehended," writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 2007c, pp. 37–38), a passage apropos of the theological project of theodicy, which attempts to understand—and, in the process, *justify*, however unwittingly—the suffering of the Other.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in the grip of and witness to such villainy, he reasons: "But, as I lost faith in good, I began to lose faith even in kindness. It seemed as beautiful and powerless as dew. What use was it if it was not contagious?....Today I can see the true power of evil. The heavens are empty. Man is alone on earth. How can the flame of evil be put out?" (p. 409). Ikonnikov's words resonate with the same despair which permeates the works of Primo Levi, Walter De-Nur, Maurice Blanchot, and Paul Celan, among countless other survivors and authors of the Shoah, but this serves to encourage his audience to make the journey with him on his quest for a post-Holocaust ethic. More than that, it makes his solution all the more credible when he eschews the easy lure of nihilism or utilitarianism, and refuses to abandon the possibility of goodness. Goodness, he concludes, is to be found neither in religious, philosophical or political systems nor in essences or categories, but in the lives of everyday people:

> Yes, as well as this terrible Good with a capital 'G', there is everyday human kindness . . . .a petty, thoughtless kindness; an unwitnessed kindness. Something we could call senseless kindness . . . .But if we think about it, we realize that this private, senseless kindness is in fact eternal....Even at the most terrible times, through all the mad acts carried out in the name of universal good and the glory of States . . . even then this senseless, pathetic kindness remained scattered throughout life like atoms of radium. (Grossman 2006, pp. 407–8)

This kindness is not mere beneficence; it is related to, and indeed inextricably bound up with, the idea of holy folly, which is contrary to the inherent selfishness or solipsism of Being. Perhaps for this very reason, it cannot be "domesticated", cannot be apprehended in ontological or epistemological (or political or social) terms:

> Kindness is powerful only while it remains powerless. If Man tries to give it power, it dims, fades away, loses itself . . . .The powerlessness of kindness, of senseless kindness, . . . can never be conquered. The more stupid, the more senseless, the more helpless it may seem, the vaster it is . . . This dumb, blind love is man's meaning . . . .Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer. (Grossman 2006, pp. 409–10)

Simply put, goodness is to be found not in dunamis, or "power", but kenosis—in the emptying of the Self for the sake of the Other, including the setting aside of self-regard and what seems simple common sense. Ikonnikov cites the example of a Russian peasant woman who finds herself caring for a badly wounded German soldier after the loss of her own family at the Nazis' hands. When he asks for water, she replies, "'Damn you . . . What

I should do is strangle you'" (Grossman 2006, pp. 408–9). Nevertheless, she gives him the water without hesitation, and when she recounts the incident to her fellows, neither she nor they can fathom her senseless goodness. Her actions, it might be said, mirror the folly or stupidity inherent to the idea of God the Son emptying himself of power and becoming truly incarnate, truly human—even to the point of dying for each and every individual human being; and, still more significant, without the least guarantee of "success" (i.e., the risk that few or any would even receive, let alone emulate, his sacrifice). Grossman and Levinas might not share Dostoevsky's view of Jesus as the promised Messiah, but it cannot be denied that they see something truly profound in the idea of a God who empties himself to the point of identifying with and even occupying the sufferings of mankind—an idea, it must be noted, which is far from alien to Judaism: "But the fact that kenosis, or the humility of a God who is willing to come down to the servile level of the human . . . also has its full meaning in the religious sensibility of Judaism is demonstrated in the first instance by biblical texts themselves," Levinas observes in "Judaism and Kenosis" (*In the Time of the Nations*, p. 101). As with a tragically small minority of Christians throughout the centuries, Grossman and Levinas see in kenosis the ultimate Divine command, the one which unifies and gives meaning to all the others—"to live and die for everyone" (Robbins 2001, p. 257).

Grossman's connection to Dostoevsky is borne out by Ikonnikov's undeniable kinship with the likes of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, Father Tikkhon in *Demons*, and the Elder Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*—all "holy fools" who are as beloved by some (the poor, the afflicted) as they are disparaged by many more (the educated, the dogmatic, the powerful).

Tikhon, for instance, tells Stavrogin that "each man sins against all", and confesses himself possibly the greatest of sinners (Dostoevsky 1994, p. 708); whilst Zosima encourages his followers to take upon the sins of others, even those of criminals—"For if I myself were righteous, perhaps there would be no criminal before me now" (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 321)—an idea lauded by Levinas and expanded upon in his talk of the ethical roots of reasoning and questioning: "Is it righteous [for me] to be?"

The essence of holy folly, in short, obtains in the fool's devotion to *living* kenosis—which is to say, embracing a being-for-the-other, or a "radical orientation towards the other," as Levinas writes of the experience in texts like *Otherwise than Being* and *Ethics and Infinity*. It is to live the love God displays not only in the Incarnation but in the very act of creation: " . . . God commits himself to this finite and fragile creation a first act of self-humiliation on God's part," Jürgen Moltmann remarks in "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World", "an act continued in his descent to his people Israel and reaching its nadir in Christ's self-surrender to death on the cross" (Moltmann 2001, p. 146).

As Levinas explains to François Poirié, "Ikonnikov is feeble-minded. But a feeble-minded person can be inspired. This is a type that exists in Russia. It is *The Idiot* of Dostoevsky . . . The good human pierces the crust of being. Only an idiot can believe in this goodness" (Robbins 2001, pp. 89–90). Ikonnikov bears out the true depths of this idiocy when he is executed for refusing to obey his Nazi captors, who order him to assist in the building of an extermination camp (Grossman 2006, p. 531). Ikonnikov's act, like Torah (the giving of which is itself an act of kenosis, but that is another essay), testifies to an Otherwise than Being precisely in his folly, his improvidence, his willing vulnerability on behalf of his fellow humans: "The Torah itself is exposed to danger because being in itself is nothing but violence, and nothing can be more exposed to violence than the Torah, which says no to it," writes Levinas in "The Temptation of Temptation". "In challenging the absurd 'that's the way it is' claimed by the Power of the powerful, the man of the Torah transforms being into human history. Meaningful movement jolts the Real" (Levinas 1994, p. 39).

To say that for Dostoevsky, Grossman, and Levinas, goodness is at widdershins with Goodness, which is theoretical and therefore apropos of totality, is to miss the mark: "Moral force is a scandal for ontological thinking," observes Richard A. Cohen in the

Translator's Introduction to *Ethics and Infinity*. "It escapes the synthesizing, centralizing forces" (Levinas 1998, p. 13). Even "antithetical" seems somehow inadequate to convey the disparity between the trio's traumatizing goodness on the one hand and the reifying Goodness inherent to the countless -isms and -asms that have ravaged Western history on the other. Is ethics even viable after the Holocaust? Does the failure of the great quasi-religious ideologies, such as Humanism and Communism and Fascism, belie the impossibility of ethics or goodness? And what of God, the God of the People of the Book? Is not the possibility of His existence likewise problematized? For these two questions, the ethical and the religious, are inextricably bound for Dostoevsky and Levinas, and, albeit more obliquely, for Grossman as well.

As Maurice Blanchot observes in *The Writing of the Disaster*, "We carry on about atheism, which has always been a privileged way of talking about God" (Blanchot 1995, p. 92). It would seem, then, that for many if not most people, the question of God remains deeply ambiguous. For Dostoevsky, Levinas, and Grossman, in fact, it would seem that what must be jettisoned is not the existence of God, per se, but that of the God of Western metaphysics, the ontotheological God, with the attendant associations of immutability, timelessness, impassibility, and so on, ad nauseam—such is the God of Being, the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle. A truly post-Holocaust God signals a return to the God of Torah—the Otherwise than Being—the God who eschews power and undertakes a radical self-limitation so as to inhabit the suffering of the sufferer, which further entails a Divine cooperation with mankind in eradicating suffering, and is the only "viable" understanding. In "Judaism and Kenosis", Levinas observes: "More important than God's omnipotence is the subordination of that power to man's ethical movements [. . .] And that, too, is one of the primordial meanings of kenosis" (Levinas 2007a, p. 113). As herein stressed, God's kenosis implies a human kenosis, a "radical orientation towards the other", a being-for-the-other, a "stupid goodness", a "holy folly"—call it what you will. *This kenotic ethos, for want of a better term, is what unites Dostoevsky, Grossman, and Levinas*. Their "dialogue", however oblique, represents what is best in literature, philosophy, and religion, and demonstrates the absolute necessity of an interdisciplinary (and interfaith) discourse.

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