

INTRODUCTION

Against the naturalisation of suffering in Western thinking, I argue that the suffering of the victims of history has a place in philosophy and, indeed, obliges philosophy to respond. More than this, I argue that the suffering of such victims is the space in which philosophy and theology can meet beyond idealism and dogmatism. The naturalisation of suffering refers to the domestication of suffering that robs it of its power to shock reason and oppose idealism and its teleological history in which suffering is just an inherent and necessary part of the historical process.

In responding to the challenge of suffering, philosophy and theology meet to raise victims' suffering as a problem for thinking and as a question to be answered philosophically. I will show how beyond ontological thinking and the divine identity of the end of

history, and beyond the Hegelian teleology of history, a new scenario for philosophical thinking can be found. Between the thinking of totality and the ultimate revelation of God, it will be necessary to account for victims and the categories that make it possible. Therefore, this book is a claim about the relevance of the marginalised to philosophy and against the intellectualism that ignores the singular and the contingent.

The dialogue between philosophy and theology is explored through Emmanuel Levinas and Johann Baptist Metz. At first glance, it appears problematic to try to link these thinkers. Metz is a German Catholic theologian striving to redeem theology from its idealism and to shake up the bases of both scholastic and Rahnerian-transcendental theology. Levinas is striving to prioritise ethics before and beyond ontology with the support of his Judaic pre-philosophical experiences; he wants thereby to overcome the ontologisation of philosophy and parallel development in theology, to the extent that he participates in an intellectualism that seeks lucidity and comprehension. Levinas insists on his credentials as a philosopher; even in his Talmudic commentaries, his readings are invariably philosophical.

Some biographical details illustrate the differences between Levinas and Metz. Metz was born in a

village of strong Catholic tradition where “[i]t is as if one were born [...] somewhere along the receding edges of the Middle Ages,”¹ and was theologically trained in the tradition of neo-Thomist thought. Levinas, for his part, was born and raised in a Lithuanian village, “a land lacking any contact at all between Jews and Christians,” a land where “Christianity was a completely closed-off world,”² and “where one breathed in Judaism with the air.”³

Moreover, Metz, as a teenager, participated as a soldier of the Third Reich in the last year of World War II, while Levinas, being Jewish with a French uniform, spent five years in a labour camp. However, despite being on opposite sides in the war, the fracture of Western civilisation in Auschwitz profoundly marked their thinking and imposed on them the unconditional obligation not to think as if Auschwitz had not taken

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- ¹ Johann Baptist Metz, “Productive Noncontemporaneity,” in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 278-9.
- ² Jill Robbins and Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 255.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 84.

place. In this way, Metz's and Levinas's thoughts are driven by the question about historical suffering that calls for a commitment *beyond* idealism.

In their attempts to overcome idealism the paths of Metz and Levinas intertwine; there are crucial intersections in their philosophical and theological projects from which we may benefit in exploring new ways to mediate between philosophy and theology in order to redeem the victims of suffering from the marginal place they have occupied in Western thinking. Both Levinas and Metz hold that human tragedies such as Auschwitz are related to the emphasis that philosophy and theology have placed on the Greek logos at the expense of Jewish wisdom. The two concur that reason must be awoken from its slumber by stressing the hidden elements of European experience preserved in biblical thought and the role that marginal and suffering figures play in Jewish wisdom. These roots prioritise the cry of those who suffer as a hermeneutical tool to awaken reason. Marked by the fracture of Western civilisation at Auschwitz, Levinas and Metz focus on the consequences of the Western way of thinking for history, particularly as regards such victims. They maintain a line of resistance against the barbarism,

despair, and nihilism into which the history and culture of Europe fell in the twentieth century.

Both thinkers find the circular thought of the Plotinian One to be the starting point of Western intellectualism in which the concrete reality of suffering is domesticated by enclosing it in a consciousness that becomes a circle from which the meaning of the whole of reality starts and finishes. The Plotinian movement of the return to the One is essentially circular: the One is the point of departure and arrival, that from where the “soul” descends and to which it ascends. Multiplicity is defined in negative opposition to this self-movement of the One as appearance, material, corporeal, evil. One of the essential elements of the circularity of the return to the One is the Parmenidean conception of Being as a formal identity, *i.e.*, as the identification between Being and thinking. In this way, if it is only possible to think Being, and thinking needs objectivity, it will be necessary for Being to be an identity, precisely because thinking can only capture the identical. Therefore, if Being is an identity, it is not possible to recognise the reality of non-identity, of that which is not Form or can only be recognised if it is redirected to Form.

In any case, the philosopher's aspiration remains, as Plato noted, that of delving into the entire structure of the world, rising to a thought that captures the profound unity of all differences and comprehends all the relationships among Forms. This aspiration entails the risk that thinking about Being is transformed into thinking about thinking, *i.e.*, into logic. For Plotinus, to know the sensible reality is to recognise in it the dialectical structure of Being and thinking, redirecting the movement and dynamism of the sensible to the movement and dynamism of thought. To the extent that thinking eludes the sensible and contingent reality, the sensible risks becoming absurd because it is not possible to account for the phenomena of reality as we experience it. Further, the experience of reality as presented before our eyes must be largely neglected: knowledge cannot be initiated from it. Therefore, reaching the truth will be based on the truth itself, which is somehow present in us by the trace that the One leaves in each of the things he caused.

The Plotinian circle notably influences philosophy and Christian theology. Both philosophy and theology remain tied to the thought of identity, a closed circle of consciousness that functions as a giver of meaning

for the whole exterior of reality. From a Christian theological perspective, Levinas wonders:

whether the devotion that animates this religion, which was originally inseparable from the love of one's fellow man and concern for justice, would not find in this ethics itself the place of its semantic birth and thence the significance of its non-indifference for the infinite difference of the One, instead of owing it to the non-satisfaction of knowing. A radical distinction which would impose itself between religion and relation!⁴

Philosophically, in Descartes for example, the circle is regression towards the *cogito* and immanent deduction within the same conscience. In Hegel the "I think" is the last form of the spirit as knowing and therefore the intelligible system is ultimately self-consciousness; that is, Hegel's dialectical process reduces any negation of identity to the same identity, and he affirms the identity of the identical and the non-identical. In

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⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 136.

this way, the non-identical is an illusion; it is only the product of a reduction of the non-concluded. Even Heidegger's ontological difference is insufficient to give meaning to the individual, to the concrete. The ontological difference is always within being; that is, concrete reality is understood from being, and the concrete individuality finds its authenticity by exiting from itself. As Orietta Ombrosi remarks, "what is repeated in this movement is the fear of the outside, the heterogeneous, the fear of alterity which force reason to favour identity, *by returning the outside and the other to the same.*"⁵

Concerning this circularity of thought, Levinas and Metz share the idea that Western rationality is insufficient to respond to the concrete reality of marginality and therefore to violence. They concur in resorting to the biblical legacy, particularly to the concepts of eschatology, apocalypse, theodicy, and messianism, to respond to the challenge that the concrete

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⁵ Orietta Ombrosi, *The Twilight of Reason: Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer and Levinas Tested by the Catastrophe*, trans. Victoria Aris (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 16. Emphasis in original.

suffering of human beings poses to reason. From this perspective, the primary interest of this book is not a systematic and comprehensive analysis of their philosophising and theologising. It is not a comparative study of Levinas's and Metz's general thought in which their perspectives and conclusions are compared, even though differences and similarities will necessarily emerge. Neither is there an interest in accepting or rejecting one or the other based on their arguments and methods. My hope is to allow these two thinkers to converse with each other without doing violence to their traditions of thought, interests, and methods.

This book takes advantage of Metz and Levinas's common interest to overcome the solipsism of the subject, the circle of thought, in philosophical and theological transcendentalism in order to recover singularity in philosophy and history and the philosophical relevance of the other who suffers. In this way, I shall claim that certain thematic and strategic similarities exist between Levinas's and Metz's perspectives that allow singularity and contingency to be restored and to do justice to the victims of history.

In terms of mutual influences, it is worth noting that Levinas and Metz meet "for the first and only

time”⁶ in the summer residence of the Pope, in Castel Gandolfo, in 1985. Pope John Paul II invited them to the biannual meetings with academics he organised in the Papal residence. About his encounter with Levinas, Metz remembers: “he came up to me and embraced me without saying a word, and I could only interpret this as a sign of his recognition that I have tried with all my might to sharpen Christianity’s and theology’s conscience about the catastrophe of Auschwitz.”⁷ Metz confesses that, despite their intellectual closeness, Levinas never becomes his teacher, and to not being “very familiar with his writings.”⁸ Levinas, for his part, never addresses in any way Metz’s political theology. Levinas’s closest reference to any political theology is the response to a question about the reception of his work in Latin America. Levinas responds that some scholars very close to theology and liberation philosophy “have also seen the same thing.”⁹

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6. Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Bochert-Kimig, *Hope against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 23.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Robbins and Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* 180.

The dialogue held between Levinas and Metz in this dissertation is facilitated by Metz's inclination to dialogue with philosophy. From his early works, the interaction with philosophy has been constant in his theologising. For him, theology is worthy of philosophical discussion. Furthermore, he considers this dialogue with philosophy essential for theology to the extent that theological thinking can be defined in terms that are foreign to it. In the secondary literature on Metz, some scholars have paid attention to this particularity of his work. For instance, Steven Ostovich brings Metz into conversation with Thomas Kuhn and Walter Benjamin. The encounter with Kuhn aims at providing a scenario for a theology-sciences dialogue for the benefit of theology.¹⁰

In describing the categories of messianic history and dangerous memories of the traditional model of history as empty time, Ostovich also uses Metz's and

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¹⁰ Steven T. Ostovich, "History, Theology, and the Philosophy of Science (Metz-Kuhn)" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1986), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. See also Steven T. Ostovich, *Reason in History: Theology and Science as Community Activities* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990).

Benjamin's perspectives.¹¹ Another attempt to establish a relationship between Metz and philosophy is Maureen H. O'Connell's endeavour to offer an alternative perspective for compassion that responds adequately to contemporary challenges, particularly suffering, globalisation, and social disasters. In doing so, O'Connell offers an account of Martha Nussbaum's political philosophy and Metz's political theology that seek to facilitate the comprehension of compassion as essential for personal and social transformation.

Furthermore, by following the paths of Metz and philosopher Michael Walzer, Alan John Revering "explores the relation of Christian eschatology to political theory."¹² Revering also endeavours to prove that "images drawn from particular religious traditions can serve as a ground for effective social criticism."¹³ From a more general perspective, James Matthew Ash-

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¹¹ Steven T. Ostovich, "Messianic History in Benjamin and Metz," *Philosophy and Theology* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1994), <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtheol19948411>

¹² Alan John Revering, "Social Criticism and Eschatology in M. Walzer and J. B. Metz" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2001), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

¹³ Ibid.

ley provides an account of the evolution of Metz's theological anthropology. What is interesting in Ashley's work is the genealogical view of Metz's theology and its theological and philosophical influences, notably Kant, Heidegger, and the philosophers of the Frankfurt School.¹⁴

Turning to Levinas's philosophising, it is worth mentioning that several attempts have been made to mediate between Levinas's ethical approach and Christian theology, most of them from theology itself. Nigel Zimmermann carries out one of the newest endeavours in this regard in his book *Levinas and Theology*.¹⁵ As Zimmermann shows, this conversation between Levinas and theology has been taken in two different directions in Levinasian scholarship. One is the dialogue with Christian theologians such as Karl Rahner, Urs von Balthasar, Karl Barth, and Bernard Lonergan;¹⁶

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¹⁴ See James Matthew Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1998).

¹⁵ Nigel Zimmermann, *Levinas and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁶ See, for example, Michael Purcell, *Mystery and Method: The Other in Rahner and Levinas* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998); Michael Sarachino, "Openness as Gift: Subject and Other

the other is the rethinking of theological themes from Levinas's perspective.¹⁷

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in Postmodern Context. A Study on Lonergan and Levinas" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2000), Proquest Digital Dissertations. Paper AAI9977742; Glenn Morrison, "Levinas, Von Balthasar, and Trinitarian Praxis," (PhD diss., Australian Catholic University, 2004), <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/digitaltheses/public/adt-acuvp50.29082005/index.html>

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The attempt to bring Levinas into conversation with theologians and Metz with philosophers has mainly been made by theologians seeking the benefit of Christian theology and spirituality. Zimmermann's work itself considers Levinas "a gift for theology,"¹⁸ to the extent that he provokes theologians to consider the ethical nature of undertaking theology. Michael Purcell also tries to harmonise Levinas's ethics with theology by affirming that theology is from the outset theological anthropology; that is, "its initial task is to ask the question of the person who is able to ask the question of God."¹⁹ This affirmation allows Purcell to align theology with Levinas's interests in tracing God in the face of the other human. In the same line of thinking, Glenn Morrison considers Levinas's philosophy "a fertile source for Christian theology."²⁰ Morrison's purpose is to unveil Levinas's vocabulary

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 Biblical Thinking," in Bloechl, *The Face of the Other*, 155-183.

¹⁸ Zimmermann, *Levinas and Theology*, 157.

¹⁹ Michael Purcell, "Is Ontology Fundamental? The Scope and Limits of Doing Theology with Levinas," in de Tavernier *et al.*, *Responsibility*, 125.

²⁰ Morrison, "Levinas," 3.

as offering Christian theology a rich source of expressions useful to identify the encounter with Christ and the other in Him.

However, as established above, the present book is a philosophical conversation between Levinas and Metz that seeks to benefit those on the margins of history and society by taking advantage of their thematic and strategic similarities. In this way, this book deals with a thinking that starts from exteriority, *i.e.*, from victims and not from ego, the “I conquer,” the “I think” or the “I” as the will to power. Thinking from the victims means a metaphysical thought *beyond* the objectifying consciousness, revealing the face that suffers injustice, hunger, oppression, and death. Claiming that the starting point of philosophy is not the *ego cogito* but victims instead means two things: 1) that the suffering of victims challenges philosophical thought and is, therefore, something to be seriously considered, and 2) that this suffering cries out for practical responsibility.

Levinas’s and Metz’s strategic similarities and respect for their ways of doing philosophy and theology are manifested in the organisation of the book. This dissertation is assembled as a triptych. It is divided into three parts brought together by the same preoccupation: how to respond to the concrete situation of

suffering. Each part is formed by two chapters, each taking the voice of one of these thinkers. The three parts of the dissertation are reason, time, and theodicy.

In the first part, I endeavour to show how by critiquing philosophical and theological rationality, Levinas (Chapter 1) and Metz (Chapter 2) reclaim an opportunity for reason that lies in biblical sources in order to find a place for contingency and singularity in history. Despite the differences in the way they critique rationality, their final claims are for foundational rationality in which the responsibility for the other who suffers is the point of departure for thinking.

In the second part, I move to consider the discontinuous time that is opposed to the continuous temporality of uninterrupted progress. For Levinas (Chapter 3), messianic time is the moment when “I” recognises the necessity to bear the suffering of other²¹ who

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²¹ As known, normally the Levinasian *Autrui* (Other, capitalized) refers to the personal other, the concrete other, while *autre* (other in lowercase) is for Levinas the other in a more general sense. The problem with this style is that Levinas sometimes capitalized and sometimes did not capitalize the personal other. Furthermore, Annette Aronowicz, the translator into English of the Talmudic writings, has found that in these texts Levinas uses

suffers, and accepts universal responsibility. In this way, time does not temporalise linearly but deviates towards an ethical relationship with another human in which an ethical-messianic subjectivity can emerge. Metz (Chapter 4) moves into the biblical account of time with an end in which the past is still valid and has not been brushed aside by the overwhelming pace of progress. In Metz's consideration of time, it is necessary to intervene, decide, and interrupt because everything is played out in a limited time. For both Levinas and Metz, the subject is staking its destiny every moment.

In the third part, I consider the concepts of suffering and memory involved in the concern for theodicy and, therefore, in the attempt to do justice to victims. Theodicy is an effort to explain that suffering is meaningless. However, for Levinas (Chapter 5), theodicy can find meaning in ethics, while for Metz (Chapter 6) it is a disturbing question *unto* God for the suffering of victims. For both thinkers, the experience of Auschwitz remains the paradigm of gratuitous suffering, and the

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Autrui and *autre* interchangeably. In this regard, I have decided to use "the other" (in lowercase) to avoid a mystifying perception of the concrete other who suffers. The exception is direct quotations from Levinas's texts.

response to this tragedy is an ethical responsibility for Levinas and political resistance transformed into compassion for Metz. Finally, in the conclusions, I highlight how Levinas's ethical responsibility and Metz's political compassion have several points of contact. These points are governed by the idea that ethics and politics are not, theory but fundamentally a claim about praxis; that is, the question of truth and the question of justice are interrelated. Both Levinas's ethics and Metz's politics are a call for the human responsibility derived from attending to concrete social circumstances.

Finally, it is important to note that despite utilising a theoretical approach, in writing this book, I have primarily had in mind the commitment of philosophy with concrete reality. I was born, live, and work as a lecturer in Colombia. This country that has suffered a fifty-year conflict that started politically with the formation of left-wing *guerrillas* at the end of the 1950s, animated by the Cuban revolution, and was exacerbated by inequalities and social injustices, particularly in the countryside. Then, during the 1980s, the problem of drugs arose, introducing new sources of funding for illegal armed groups while new actors in the conflict emerged, the paramilitary groups. Despite paramilitary groups and *guerrillas* having demobilised,

violence and its victims are the main problems with which Colombia currently contends. According to the Colombian Centre for Historical Memory, from 1958 to 2012, the number of people murdered during the conflict exceeded 220,000, and the living victims were approximately 177,000.²²

From this perspective, I have always questioned myself as a philosopher, asking whether it can ignore such realities and whether philosophy can get involved in any way in this problem. Theodor Adorno once said about Auschwitz that humans would need to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz would not repeat itself so that nothing similar would happen. Is it possible to think from the perspective of victims? Is it possible that these victims can impact philosophy and help transform concrete reality? In this dissertation, I think from out of these concerns, and starting to think is also starting to respond.

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²². See Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *¡Basta Ya! Colombia: Memoria de Guerra y Dignidad. Resumen* (Bogotá: Pro-Off Set, 2013), 23-24, <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2013/bastaYa/resumen-ejecutivo-basta-ya.pdf>