

Olive Press
Research Paper

ISSUE II
NOVEMBER 2011



A CRITICAL CONSIDERATION OF
PRIMO LEVI ON THE COMMON HUMANITY

Naomi Barker

£2 WHEN SOLD

A CRITICAL CONSIDERATION OF PRIMO LEVI ON THE COMMON HUMANITY

Naomi Barker

Welcome to the Olive Press Research Paper – an occasional paper featuring articles that cover a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

Articles are contributed by CMJ staff (past and present), also by Trustees, Representatives, CMJ Supporters or by interested parties.

Articles do not necessarily portray CMJ's standpoint on a particular issue but may be published on the premise that they allow a pertinent understanding to be added to any particular debate.

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
 we drink you at midday and morning we drink you at evening
 we drink and we drink
 a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margareta
 your aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays his vipers
 He shouts play death more sweetly this Death is a master from Deutschland
 he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke to the sky
 you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too cramped

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
 we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
 we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
 this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
 he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
 a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
 he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air
 he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
 dein goldenes Haar Margarete
 dein aschenes Haar Shulamith

Paul Celan – *Todesfuge*, 1948

Preface

Before beginning my essay I must acknowledge some possible objections towards my project. Firstly, Levi rejected the use of the word ‘Holocaust’ considering it ‘inappropriate, rhetorical and wrong.’¹ However, for the sake of simplicity I will use it in this essay, where possible exchanging it with ‘Shoah.’ Secondly, I am aware that some would regard the “sacredness” of the subject matter as ‘deserving a respectful silence when it comes to critical analysis.’² I feel a suitable argument against this is made by Druker:

‘Levi’s writings deserve this sustained intellectual engagement because they testify powerfully to the victim’s experience and speak insightfully about the complex legacies of the Holocaust with respect to ethics, the limits of language and representation, the double-edged sword of technology and the problems entailed in remembering and memorializing atrocity.’³

In all my criticisms I seek a dialogue with Levi’s work, in full appreciation and respect regarding his background and subject matter.

Finally, I use the word ‘man’ in this essay in an asexual sense.

- 1 Levi, Primo in ‘Return to Auschwitz’ interview with Daniel Toaff and Emanuele Ascarelli (1982) in Belpoliti, Marco and Gordon, Robert (eds.), *Primo Levi, The Voice of Memory: Interviews, 1961-1987* (New York: Polity Press, 2001) p. 215: reiterated in a separate interview with Marco Vigevani (1984) *Ibid.* p. 225
- 2 Kremner, Roberta - ‘Introduction’ to *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as writer and witness* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001)
- 3 Druker, Jonathan – *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p. 4

Introduction

In 1933 Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist German Worker's Party (NSDAP) became Chancellor of Germany, marking the beginning of a dictatorship which finally unravelled with the country's defeat at the end of the Second World War, May 1945. During this period, in a systematic persecution of the Jewish race across Europe, approximately two-thirds of the nine million population was killed in what has now come to be commonly known as the 'Holocaust.' It was the event which overshadowed the twentieth century forcing a number of fundamental questions to be asked concerning the nature and solidarity of humans. Many of these have been considered by chemist Primo Levi (1919-1987), a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp, who described his year there in his book *If this is a Man* (1947) and the author of numerous novels, essays and poems. Whilst a self-proclaimed witness, his work has many facets of philosophy – 'Levi managed to stage in his writing a series of profoundly insightful ethical and political dilemmas thrown up by his personal history, rooted in Auschwitz and also to move deftly between the particularity of his extreme experiences and the shared reality of everyday lives and communities'.⁴ It is in this respect that I look to engage critically with Primo Levi and his concept of a common humanity. My thesis is that Primo Levi, contrary to many critics, depicts a tragic perception of the human condition which necessitates a concept of a common humanity in terms of recognising our shared potential capacities and encouraging responsibility towards one another by taking preventative measures against succumbing to them. This critical analysis will comprise part one and two of this essay. In part three I will firstly suggest how Levi's concept of a common humanity can be extended to avoid potential difficulties by including one's capacity for choice and secondly argue for the crucial importance for retaining a concept of a common humanity.

Primo Levi – a background

Primo Levi was born into a highly assimilated and cultured bourgeois Jewish family in Turin, the Piedmont region of Italy. In 1941 he graduated with a degree from Turin University in Chemistry, and in 1943 he joined a Partisan resistance movement - Justice and Liberty - in the mountains of northern Italy. However, he was captured by the Fascists in December 1943 and eventually sent to a deportation camp in Fossoli. On the 22nd February 1944 the whole camp was deported, via cattle trucks, to Auschwitz. By the end of 1943, following Stalingrad, Germany had become vitally short of manpower such

4 Belpoliti, Marco and Gordon, Robert S.C. – 'Primo Levi's Holocaust Vocabularies' in Gordon, Robert S. C. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

that even the Jews who could work became indispensable. Hence the beginning of the notorious 'selection' process on arrival to which Levi was subjected. He was sent to work in Monowitz, one of the three main camps in the Auschwitz complex. Even here the survival-period was anticipated to be three months⁵ but through a number of incidents including the 'luck' of being struck by scarlet fever when the camp was being evacuated - thus avoiding the 'death march' - Levi managed to survive; out of his convoy of 650 people he was one of the 15 to return home. His need to bear witness was so intense that even in the camps he began describing his experience on scribbled notes⁶ and his first account was *Auschwitz report*, written with Leonardo De Benedetti in spring 1945. *If this is a Man* followed, published in 1947. After liberation he resumed his career as a chemist, writing on the side, continuing to publish books, essays and articles until his death. He retired in 1975 and became a full time author. It has often been claimed that it was his occupation as a scientist that allowed him to write on such a difficult topic in an impressively rational, controlled style.⁷ He died in April 1987 by suspected suicide.

PART ONE

Primo Levi and the human condition

Primo Levi has often been applauded by critics for his ability to retain a 'positive, optimistic, enlightened vision'⁸ despite his terrible experiences in the concentration camps. That is 'a vision of human reason and dignity,'⁹ celebrating the ability to retain one's humanity in circumstances which tried to consume them:¹⁰ for example Paul Bailey in his introduction to *If this is a Man* writes 'what finally emerges from the book is a sense of man's worth, of dignity fought for and maintained against all the odds'.¹¹ I want to suggest that this perception of Levi is not true: rather his exploration of human nature in the microcosm of camp life depicts a fundamentally tragic condition. I will suggest that this existed in tension with his humanist, enlightenment upbringing, something he largely recognised and was constantly trying to negotiate.

5 Levi, Primo as reported by Canon, Ferdinando - *Conversations with Primo Levi*, translated by John Shepley (Vermont: The Marlboro Press, 1989) p. 31

6 Levi, Primo - see afterword to *The Truce*, translated by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1988), p. 382

7 For example, Robert Gordon in the preface to *Auschwitz Report*, translated by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1988) p. 11

8 Giuliani, Massimo - *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003) p. 40

9 *Ibid.* p. 40

10 For example, Michael Ignatieff in his introduction to Levi, Primo - *Moments of Reprieve*, translated by Ruth Feldman (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2002) p. 4

11 Bailey, Paul - 'Introduction' to Levi, Primo - *If This is a Man*, translated by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1988) p. 15

In *If this is a Man*, Levi argues that the *Lager*¹² in a hideous sense acted as ‘a gigantic, biological and social experiment’¹³ – an average, unselected sample of humanity¹⁴ were stripped of everything, reducing men to a state of being ‘crushed against the bottom’. In this malicious ‘experiment’ the camps laid the human character bare and in this respect they allowed Levi ‘to furnish documentations for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind,’¹⁵ that is to consider a question he struggles to negotiate throughout his works – what is a man if he can suffer and inflict these things? Whilst his analysis focuses on individuals in Auschwitz his reflections have significance on a much larger scale as Signorini helpfully explains: ‘By showing us what a single individual can be reduced to Levi speaks to us of mankind, and succeeds in rising from the particular to the universal by describing what human beings can turn into if certain conditions arise.’¹⁶

Fragility of our ‘humanity’

From the very beginning of transportation the process of ‘de-humanisation’ was initiated. Jews were forced into over-crowded cattle-trucks without any basic amenities,¹⁷ stripped of all hair and clothing,¹⁸ and finally deprived of a name which was replaced by a tattooed number.¹⁹ Once in the camp, numerous hardships continued oppressing men to an ‘animal-like state,’²⁰ reducing beings to the terrifying image described by Rousset:

*Men without faith, haggard and violent, men carrying their shattered convictions, their lost dignities. A whole people stark naked, inwardly naked, stripped of all culture, of all civilisations... Unbelievable skeletons, with empty eyes, walked as though blind on stinking filth.*²¹

These are the *Muselmänner* which Levi also refers to as ‘the drowned,’ constituting ‘the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass.’²² I would propose that when one

12 This is German for ‘camps’ often used by Levi to describe Auschwitz.

13 *Ibid.* p. 93

14 Levi, Primo – *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (Abacus: London, 1989) p. 33

15 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 15

16 Signorini, Franca Molino – ‘The Duty and Risk of testimony: Primo Levi as Keeper of Memory’ in Kremner, *Memory and Mastery* p. 185

17 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 22

18 ‘Clothes, even the foul clothes which were distributed, even the crude clogs with their wooden soles, are a tenuous but indispensable defence. Anyone who does not have them no longer perceives himself as a human being but as a worm.’ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 90

19 ‘The operation was not painful and lasted no more than a minute but it was traumatic. Its symbolic meaning was clear to everyone: this is an indelible mark, you will never leave here; this is the mark with which slaves are branded and cattle sent to the slaughter, and this is what you have become.’ *Ibid.* p. 95

20 See Levi, Primo in ‘Return to Auschwitz’ interview with Toaff, Daniel and Ascarelli, Emanuele (1982) in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 216

21 Rousset, David – *A World Apart*, translated by Yvonne Myse and Roger Senhouse (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951) p. 2 and 11

22 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 92

considers these as the possible depths to which humans can be forced to sink, then one must reconsider what ‘dignity’, ‘virtue’ and ‘survival’ really mean. At base, those who survived were not the ‘best’ but the worst, the most selfish,²³ in a subverted Darwinian law of survival²⁴ – anyone who tried to maintain their ordinary virtues only put themselves in greater danger. It is this lesson that Levi tries to install in Bandi, a new arrival from Hungary whose ‘saintliness’ was ‘out of place down there’.²⁵ The four men Levi gives as examples of how to reach ‘salvation’²⁶ do not mark admirable qualities but quite the opposite, they are viciously selfish individuals. This base drive for survival meant consequently there was an absence of any solidarity amongst the prisoners; rather it was a Hobbesian life, a continuous war of everybody against everybody else.²⁷

I would argue that Levi’s description of Auschwitz calls one to re-evaluate all previously held notions of what it means to be human, and to realise the fragility of that which we presume to constitute our ‘humanity’: ‘Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself’.²⁸ I suggest that we must accept notions such as ‘dignity’ to be a luxury, redefining ‘humanity’ to include the reality of *Muselmänner*, a fate to which we can all be rapidly reduced²⁹ and which we must live with as an ever present possibility.³⁰ Furthermore it is apparent that in the ultimate pressure to survive notions of solidarity and virtuous behaviour prove of little functionality – we are fundamentally selfish creatures who will use any means possible to stay on top:³¹ this is the dark side latent to human nature.³² It is the tragedy of the human condition, and whilst it is an uncomfortable notion, one has to accept the truth to Langer’s profound point: ‘celebrating survival as a triumph of the human spirit, or of the will to resist, or of man’s inflexibly moral nature, deflects our attention from one of the most melancholy bequests of the Holocaust – that survival may not be a supreme blessing at all’.³³ To consolidate my

23 See Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 62

24 Levi, Primo in Canon, *Conversations*, p. 20

25 ‘The Disciple’ in Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, p. 47-54

26 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 98

27 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 108

28 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 33

29 Levi argues that it only takes ‘a few weeks’ for such a ‘transformation’ to be ‘well on its way.’ In *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 89

30 Howes, Dustin Ellis – ‘If this is a person and the possibility of community’ prepared for 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, August 28-31, 2003

31 Levi gives Schepschel as an example of ‘the saved’ who does not hesitate to have his accomplice in a theft condemned to a flogging in the hope of gaining favour. See Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 99

32 Patruno writes that the *Lager* ‘often forced the human character to lay itself bare... many prisoners more often than not revealed a dark side, of their true selves, a side they themselves may not have been aware of possessing.’ See Patruno, Nicholas ‘Primo Levi, Dante and the “Canto of Ulysses” in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, edited by Stanislaw G. Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 35

33 Langer, Lawrence L – *Versions of Survival: the Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) p. 83

argument I will now consider two other aspects of the human condition highlighted by Levi which I suggest confirm the tragedy of the human condition as I have already set it out.

Selfish psyche

In an interview from 1983 he describes how an ability to ‘turn dumb’ was a source of salvation for the deportee as a means to get through the day without worrying about immediate concerns.³⁴ By ‘turn dumb’ I presume Levi is referring to a tendency of humanity he mentions elsewhere, namely to lie to oneself as a source of protection from the truth. This is first discussed by Levi in *If This is a Man* as a means to endure the torment of the selections,³⁵ but it is brought up in a more general sense in *The Drowned and the Saved* when he mentions humans’ capacity to fabricate for themselves a ‘convenient reality.’ I would argue that this aspect of the human condition again points to an inherent selfishness in man’s nature. Iris Murdoch writes -

*The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself ... One of its main pastimes is day-dreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reveries designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation.*³⁶

The focus of the psyche in generating a ‘convenient reality’ is on its own well-being and whilst it seems hard to criticise this selfishness in terms of the victims, I would suggest that it is problematic with respect to the perpetrators by allowing them to shed responsibility for their deeds, to ‘protect the psyche’ from the pain of guilt. For example in *Into that darkness* Gitta Sereny asks Frank Stangl’s - commandant of Treblinka extermination camp - wife what she thinks would have happened if at any time she had faced her husband with the ultimate choice: leave the job or his wife will leave him. After careful consideration Mrs. Stangl replies with honesty that he would have chosen her. Later she writes a new letter asserting that she was mistaken and he would have stayed with his job: ‘I can therefore in all truthfulness say that from the very beginning of my life to now, I have always lived honourably’. Sereny concludes that this letter shows ‘what we all know, which is that the truth can be a terrible thing, sometimes too terrible to live with’.³⁷ However, her point

34 Levi, Primo - ‘The Duty of Memory’ interview with Bravo, Anna and Cereja, Federico (1983) in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 218 - 249

35 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 131, 132, 137. Reiterated in Levi, Primo - *Other Peoples Trades*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus. 1991) p. 92

36 Murdoch, Iris - *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1970) p. 78

37 Sereny, Gitta - *Into that Darkness: From mercy killing to mass murder* (London: Andre Deutsche Limited: 1974) p. 362

needs to be developed further, that is to highlight the real issue at hand - Mrs Stangl is persuading herself otherwise in order to shirk the responsibility of guilt, the 'consolation' of the psyche described by Murdoch. This is fundamentally selfish, depriving others of their right for a deed to be acknowledged in a failure to take responsibility and action. Thus this tendency of the psyche must be resisted.

Drive for power

IO The second aspect to the tragedy of the human condition which I would highlight as given by Levi is a desire for power: '[p]ower exists in all the varieties of the human social organisation... it is likely that a certain degree of man's domination over man is inscribed in our genetic patrimony as gregarious animals'.³⁸ His key example of this is Chaim Rumkowski,³⁹ a Jew who was made 'President' (or Elder) of the Lodz ghetto where he came to see himself in the role of an absolute but enlightened monarch, ultimately meeting the fate of all the other inhabitants of the ghetto at the gas chambers, September 1944. Levi's point is that we are like Rumkowski, 'dazzled' by power and prestige and forgetting our essential fragility: 'In the Shakespearean flavour of this grotesque and tragic story, I had glimpsed a metaphor for our civilisations: above all, the imbalance in which we live, and to which we have become accustomed, between the enormous quantity of time and energy we spend in order to attain power and prestige and the essential futility of such aims'.⁴⁰

Certainly there is truth in Levi's point: both Sereny and Arendt⁴¹ in their psycho-analytical studies of Nazi perpetrators note how Stangl and Eichmann's positions in the SS satisfied a desire to be somebody of importance - holding a position of power - however sinister that may be:

*At home, in the Sudetenland, my father was... well... a joiner neither very good, nor bad - you know. But I can remember when he got that black SS uniform: that's when he began to be somebody I suppose, rather than just anybody... the power, the uniqueness, the difference between himself and all those others.*⁴²

Such is this desire to be a 'somebody' that one can seek to attain it and then retain

38 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 30

39 He tells this story as 'Story of a Coin' in *Moments of Reprieve* p. 161-172 and in *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 43-50

40 'Itinerary of a Jewish writer' in Levi, Primo - *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, edited by Marco Belpoliti, translated by Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005) p. 165

41 'From a humdrum life without significance and consequence the wind had blown him into History, as he understood it.' - See Arendt, Hannah - *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2006) p. 33

42 SS man Gustav Menzberger's son, quoted by Sereny, *Into that Darkness*, p. 222

it at the expense of moral integrity. This is illustrated by Rousset in his description of Franz, a popular common criminal who temporarily took up the duties of camp leader until a placement arrived: 'No sooner did he come into power, than his attitude changed completely... It placed him above humiliating control, and made him mighty in the concentration camp world. And from then onwards he consecrates himself to the pursuit of his constant obsession to live and act like a Lord'.⁴³ To Levi's point I would add that whilst perhaps there is a desire deep in us all for power, a divide in human personality exists which means that as much as there are those who achieve power there are those who are easily able to be ruled. Hannah Arendt perceptively writes – 'It is as though mankind divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence (who think that everything is possible if one knows how to organise masses for it) and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of their lives'.⁴⁴ I would suggest that a clear example of this is embodied in Levi's essay 'Rappoport's Testament' in *Moments of Reprieve*. Here Valerio, whose 'limitations, his deficiencies relegated him' stands in contrast to Rappoport, who 'lived in the Camp like a tiger in the jungle, striking down and practicing extortion on the weak.' In the world of the *Lager* it is people such as Rappoport who are more inclined to be 'saved' – those who are prepared to forgo their morality and sense of solidarity as a means to survive by domination: again humanity seems to operate on a subverted Darwinian modality of survival. It is in this relationship between 'weak' and 'strong' that one can appreciate Enzensberger's theory of 'dirt':

*'...it is a hard and fast rule that the stronger the bid for power, the louder the cry of order and cleanliness. The fact that this produces fresh dirt is painstakingly suppressed. But in reality power desires the universal pigsty; its intention is not to promote hygiene but itself. It follows that the exercise of power is a dirty business.'*⁴⁵

In the quest for power, our morality becomes lost or subverted as our selfish drive asserts itself. In the camp everything was dirty, literally and metaphorically in the struggle for power which frequently correlated with survival. As a means to retain power, the distance between the poles of 'weak' and 'strong' is increasingly exploited in a subversion of 'cause' and 'effect.' For example one day whilst Levi was undertaking forced labour in the camp a group of children from the Hitler Youth were brought on a 'guided visit': the instructors did not hide their message which Levi summarises as '[t]heir beards are long, they don't wash, they're dirty, they can't even speak properly, they're only good to

43 Rousset, *A World Apart*, p. 51

44 Arendt, Hannah – *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986) p. vii

45 Enzensberger, Christian – *Smut: An Anatomy of Dirt*, translated by Sandra Morris (London: Calder and Boyars, Ltd. 1972) p. 53

work with pick and shovel, we have no choice but to treat them like this'.⁴⁶ As this story exemplifies, the Nazis created 'dirt' in a reduction of the prisoners to an animal-like state as a means to place them at ever greater distances apart, thus justifying their claim to power and a necessity to 'cleanse' the nation of Jews.

Tragic conception of morality post-Holocaust

I would make one last point concerning the tragedy of the human condition, which is that Levi forces one to question the presumption that there exists a shared 'standard' notion of morality. Should behaviour which is conceived as morally ambiguous but which allows one to survive be held up as 'virtues'? Levi certainly thinks so – in the preface to *Moments of Reprieve* he argues that the 'protagonists of these stories are "men" beyond all doubt, even if the virtue that allows them to survive and makes them unique is not always one approved of by a common morality'.⁴⁷ I would suggest that this has serious implications for all previously held notions of morality: when, as in the camps, one is reduced to a situation of absolute survival, all prior conceptions of what constitutes a "virtue" are changed. In the *Lager* the 'ordinary moral world' could not survive the other side of the barbed wire,⁴⁸ a place where morality was reduced to the 'dilemma of a choiceless choice'.⁴⁹ Langer gives extracts from the diary of Sonderkommando member Salemn Lewenthal of Auschwitz (unearthed 1962), and follows on to comment:

*Lewenthal struggles towards an understanding of what being in the Sonderkommando implies for his humanity and the humanity of his comrades... Moral authority meets loathsome fact, and what emerges is that most men prefer not to die in such a way, and will do anything, including burning the bodies of other men, to stay alive a little longer.*⁵⁰

It is important to heed Levi's advice not to judge but to meditate on such a story with pity and rigour⁵¹ – this was the 'grey zone' a world where all common standards had been decimated including any sense of 'right' and 'wrong.' I would suggest that commonly held notions of morality are proven as fragile as notions of human dignity, rapidly crumbling in extreme situations of survival, overcome by more imperative concerns.

Interestingly Levi presumes the existence of a standard morality which can be returned

46 Levi, 'Racial Intolerance' in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 119

47 Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, p. 10

48 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 92

49 Langer, *Versions of Survival*, p. 102

50 *Ibid.* P. 96

51 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 42. Repeated again in 'Primo Levi in Conversation' an interview with Ian Thomson,(1987) in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 40

to after Auschwitz. For example he writes that there is a ‘morality common to all times and all civilisations, which is an integral part of our human heritage and which in the end must be acknowledged’⁵² - in the camps ‘the law had not disappeared. It was sleeping. [After release] It was an immediate return to common morality’.⁵³ Presumably he believes that in liberation the common perception of what constitutes a ‘virtue’ is re-instated. However, I would argue, given he has shown how much this ‘common morality’ can be subverted in a feat to survive, that all pre-Holocaust conceptions of morality are now questionable in terms of theoretical grounding. Hannah Arendt’s words are uncomfortable but true – ‘We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion’.⁵⁴ What is so terrifying about the Nazi state is that its persecution of the Jewish race was not officially ‘illegal’ – rather it had redefined evil as a civil norm:⁵⁵ being ‘ordinary’ in the Germany that gave itself to Nazism was to be a member of a lethal political culture.⁵⁶ It became a crime simply to exist as a Jew thus opening up a new possibility for us all: ‘each of us could be tried and condemned and executed without ever knowing why’.⁵⁷ In an attempt to guard against the re-occurrence of a state defined morality such as Nazi Germany, international laws of ‘human rights’ have been articulated to meet Arendt’s demands for a ‘new guarantee’ for ‘human dignity’.⁵⁸ However even these have been confronted with theoretical difficulties,⁵⁹ something she recognises – ‘the many recent attempts to frame a new bill of human rights... have demonstrated that no one seems able to define with any assurance what these general human rights are, as distinguished from the rights of citizens’.⁶⁰ Thus I would argue that humans are left in a tragic paradox post-Holocaust: a terrifying situation whereby all conceptions of morality appear extremely vulnerable but attempts to solidify them with new moral vocabularies have only proved theoretically effective.

Levi’s negotiation of the tragic human condition

I would suggest that people who choose to read into Levi’s account notions of respect

52 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 84

53 Levi, Primo in ‘Primo Levi in London’ an interview with Rudolf, Anthony (1986) in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 25

54 Arendt, *Origins*, p. ix

55 ‘The law of Hitler’s land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: “Thou shalt kill” - Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 150

56 Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah – *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1997) p. 455

57 Primo Levi on *The Trial* in ‘Germaine Greer Talks to Primo Levi’ (1985) in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 3-12

58 Arendt, *Origins*, p. ix

59 A good article highlighting the problems of different approaches and reaching such a conclusion is Meldon, A. I – *Rights and Persons* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977) p. 186-199

60 Arendt, *Origins*, p. 293

and dignity are falling prey to presuming valid an inherited set of enlightenment, humanist values without re-questioning them in light of Auschwitz, a challenge which Druker sets out against Levi himself:

[W]hile we have no reason to doubt the authenticity of his canonical Holocaust text written immediately after the war, we need to be alert to the particular cultural lens through which any memoirist views experience... even at Auschwitz, where, like all victims, he underwent an almost unimaginable dehumanisation at the hands of other peoples, his trust in secular humanism and rational thought remained largely intact.⁶¹

Is Druker's point fair? He is certainly not alone in his claim concerning Levi's ethical outlook: for example Gordon, amongst others,⁶² asserts that Levi was an 'epitome of the educated, secular, modern subject, with many of the liberal, progressive, bourgeois values out of which modern Europe had grown in various stages, and times, from the Reformation and Enlightenment onwards'.⁶³ I would suggest that the argument can be refuted in part by Primo Levi's tragic conception of humanity as I have just set it out: this does not reassert humanist values but challenges them by the terrible revelations of Auschwitz – here men were not shown to be dignified noble creatures, but at base, selfish, greedy for power, and bent on survival at the expense of solidarity and morality.

Where I think their argument does bear weight is in terms of 'reason,' a value Levi – with his enlightenment, humanist upbringing – was determined to maintain despite its constant tension with his tragic conception. For example he was keen to marvel at reason,⁶⁴ to 'understand' Auschwitz,⁶⁵ whilst recognising that in the camps any notion of rationality was destroyed – 'there is no why here'⁶⁶ so '*Ne pas chercher a comprendre*'.⁶⁷ He cannot concede that Auschwitz is perhaps beyond comprehension. I would suggest that it is his attempt to deal with the painful 'assault' on rationality that the camps inflicted which he tries to embody in his short story 'Force Majeure' in *The Mirror Maker*, reminiscent of Kafka's *The Trial*, a book that caused him great discomfort,⁶⁸ arguably because it bears the same 'super-sense' which dictated the Nazi activities.⁶⁹ It is a tension which exists in many of his writings: a desire to retain the necessity of reason as a means to prevent again

61 Druker, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz*, p. 18

62 Giuliani, *A Centaur in Auschwitz*, p. 39

63 Gordon, Robert – *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 16

64 For example Levi, 'News from the Sky' in *Other Peoples Trades*, p. 10-14

65 Levi, Primo in 'The Drowned and the Saved' an interview with Calcagno, Giorgio (1986) in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 111

66 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 35

67 *Ibid.* p. 109

68 Levi, Primo in 'An Assault Called Franz Kafka' an interview with De Melis, Federico (1983) in *The Voice of Memory* p. 155-160. Also see 'Note to Franz Kafka's *The Trial*' in Levi, *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 140-142

69 Notion of 'super sense' in totalitarian ideologies is explained by Arendt, *Origins*, p. 457

the ‘thousands of faithful and blind executors of orders’ without whom the ‘savage beasts’ of Hitler and Himmler would have been ‘impotent and disarmed’,⁷⁰ whilst recognising that reason can be made redundant as a means to live more comfortably unawares.⁷¹ For example, to a Nazi sympathiser who shirks responsibility by claiming that the Germans had been ‘betrayed’ by Hitler’s ‘beautiful words’ he writes back – ‘I myself found in Katowice, after the liberation, innumerable packages of forms by which the heads of German families were authorised to draw clothes and shoes for adults and children from the Auschwitz warehouses; did no one ask himself where so many children’s shoes were coming from?’⁷² He is incredulous at the human capacity to avoid an unpleasant reality and the guilt of inaction by refusing to facilitate their ability to reason: he cannot accept that the Nazi regime may have proven rationality to be as unstable a feature of the human condition as morality, disintegrating in extreme situations. Trying to negotiate this terrain leaves Levi in a state of perplexity: in an interview from 1961 he describes how ‘the man of yesterday – and so also the man of today – can act against all reason, with impunity... I did believe that history could be interpreted in a utilitarian key, as progress. But if you look at recent history, you cannot but feel confusion’.⁷³

PART TWO

Primo Levi, the human condition and a concept of a common humanity

I have argued that Primo Levi depicts the human condition as essentially tragic: under the perverted conditions of the *Lager* – in the warped social experiment that it was – a raw exposition is given of our nature as fundamentally selfish beings, with a desire to dominate and rule over others and on which common moral notions only have a feeble hold. I would argue that it is within this tragic perception that Primo Levi holds a concept of a common humanity as a crucial means for taking action against these traits of human nature by encouraging solidarity in terms of taking responsibility.

Any notion of a common humanity in terms of human solidarity may appear completely inadequate given the extremity with which it was violated by the Nazis. One example would be Jean Améry, who was captured by the Gestapo and tortured for his participation in a Belgium resistance movement. He writes: ‘Whoever has succumbed to torture can

70 See essay ‘The Commander of Auschwitz’ in Levi, Primo – *The Mirror Maker*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 2002) p. 103

71 For example, Arendt writes on Eichmann – ‘it was as though this story ran along a different tape in his memory, and it was this taped memory that showed itself to be proof against reason and argument and information and insight of any kind.’ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 78

72 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 148

73 Levi, Primo in ‘Round Table: The Jewish Question’ in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 180

no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, in the end, under torture, will not be regained.' By 'trust in the world' he means the certainty by reason of written/unwritten social contracts that the other person will respect my physical and metaphysical being.⁷⁴ I would suggest that it is precisely because of the violation of this 'trust in the world' that Levi posits the necessity for a notion of a common humanity. It is imperative that a situation is not allowed to arise again which gives full access to the fundamental features of human nature, not only in terms of the violation it can represent but because of the potentially self-destructive consequences our own condition can bring about – 'Each of our fundamental traits carry the potential for our undoing... [characteristics] which fuel our strength in one direction, may be necessary for survival, but they also cause our unhappiness or death. Even more drastic, they may lead to our annihilation as a species.'⁷⁵

I will argue that for Levi a concept of a common humanity involves recognition that as a species of people victim to a tragic condition we are vulnerable to one another's shared potential capacities – this encourages responsibility towards one another in terms of taking preventative measures. Levi is plagued by the difficulty that he was 'saved,' that he speaks in the proxy of the true witnesses, the *Muselmänner*.⁷⁶ He lived with a 'permanent search of justification'⁷⁷ and I would tentatively suggest that perhaps asserting a notion of a common humanity as a means to ensure that humanity will never again be reduced to the state of 'the drowned' was one key 'justification' he found to his witnessing: '[w]e must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experiences, we have collectively been the witnesses of a fundamental, unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone... It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say'.⁷⁸ I will set out evidence for Levi's concept of a common humanity as I have posited it in two parts – understanding the extent of our capacities and recognising shared responsibility for our actions.

Understanding the extent of our capacities

A crucial argument of Levi's for his concept of a common humanity in a sense of shared capacities is his breaking down of stereotypes to postulate that the perpetrators of Nazism were not made of a 'perverse human substance'⁷⁹ but 'were average human beings'⁸⁰

74 Amery, John – *At the Mind's Limits*, translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (London: Granta Publications, 1999) p. 40. Also see p. 28

75 Homer, Frederic D. – *Primo Levi and the Politics of Survival* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2001) p. 49

76 *Ibid.* p. 63

77 Levi, Primo – *The Drowned and the Saved* p. 63

78 *Ibid.* p. 166

79 *Ibid.* p. 97

80 *Ibid.* p. 169

and thus we can understand that, to an extent, these are crimes we all have the potential to enact: 'they have demonstrated for all centuries to come what unsuspected reserves of viciousness and madness lie latent in man'.⁸¹ Martha Nussbaum in her book *The Fragility of Goodness* discusses Euripides' *Hecuba*, where Hecuba, a 'good character' is transformed into a revenge-bent beast. Nussbaum concludes that given she can be corrupted it becomes a possibility for adult excellence in general.⁸² I would suggest that in much the same way the Nazis proved what the 'average human being' can be corrupted into, a process to which we are all susceptible: even Langbein a prisoner of the camp remarkably acknowledges that '[i]nnumerable people would not have behaved any differently from the majority of guards if they had been ordered to go there'.⁸³ What is particularly chilling about this thought in terms of Nazi Germany is the compliance with which society participated in the persecution of the Jews. Daniel Goldhagen has convincingly shown that 'ordinary Germans' were 'willing' en masse to join in, so convinced were they by a long-standing culture of anti-Semitism: 'the perpetrators, having consulted their own conviction and morality and having judged the mass annihilation of Jews to be right, did not want to say "no"'.⁸⁴ It is explanations such as Goldhagen's which are essential to understanding how the Holocaust came about and thus preventing it from happening again. However, this does involve a degree of understanding, recognition that in our common humanity they are crimes for which we all potentially have the capacity.⁸⁵

This is an incredibly uncomfortable truth and something I would suggest Levi struggled to accept, only coming round to later on in his life. It was, perhaps, the purpose for writing *The Drowned and the Saved* - in an interview to Silvia Giacomini in 1979 he said he no longer wanted to write about Auschwitz anymore, that it was 'no longer a current issue'.⁸⁶ Later that year in an interview with Giuseppe Grassano he admitted that 'I feel in my stomach, in my guts, something that I haven't quite digested, connected to the theme of the *Lager* seen again from thirty-five years distance... to divide into black and white means not to know human nature'. I would argue that possibly because it was an idea which Levi was - understandably - not fully reconciled to, that contradictions can be found in his writings concerning the notion of 'understanding.' For example in the after-word to *The Truce* he

81 Levi, Primo - 'Deportees Anniversary' in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 3-5

82 Nussbaum, Martha. C. - *The fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. 399

83 Langbein, Hermann - *People in Auschwitz*, translated by Harry Zohn (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004) p. 519

84 Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, p 14. Also see Hartmann, Dieter, D - 'Anti-Semitism and the Appeal of Nazism' in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 5. No. 4 (Dec 1984) Freddie Knoller described how it was the civilians of his Austrian town - including neighbours who he had grown up with - who readily enacted the violence of *Kristallnacht*, November 1938. From his talk, 'Survival, Memory and Testimony: Personal Perspective on the Holocaust', Senate House, London - 1st February 2010

85 Another example would be the Milgram experiment conducted from 1960 to 1963. It is discussed with particular relevance to my argument by Formosa, Paul - 'Understanding Evil Acts' in *Human Studies*, Vol 30. No. 2 (Jun 2007), pp. 65

86 Levi, Primo in 'The Wrench' an interview with Giacomini, Silvia (1979) in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 25

admits a 'sense of relief' that the Nazi perpetrators deeds 'cannot be comprehensible to us' because 'they are non-human words and deeds, really counter-human' which is then seemingly contradicted by his following claim that 'we must be on our guard' not to let our 'consciences be seduced and obscured again'.⁸⁷ I would suggest this marks a tension which can be found throughout his works between his life 'aim' to understand how the Holocaust could have happened⁸⁸ and his assertion that one 'cannot' and 'must not' understand what happened.⁸⁹ It is clear why he is reluctant – he is concerned firstly that 'understanding' to some extent 'justifies' the act,⁹⁰ and secondly that it generates an incorrect identification between the victim and the murderer.⁹¹ I would suggest that these concerns can be alleviated by a renewed conception of 'understanding.' Here I call on a useful distinction made by Paul Forsena.⁹² He argues that one can have a 'basic understanding' of an act when one can give a 'reason explanation' and can see how that reason could lead that agent to act as they do. This can involve off-line stimulation to see how, with a set of explicitly pretend beliefs and desires one can formulate a pretend reason for doing an act. In 'full understanding' one can imagine oneself as actually able to do the act. This involves both identifying and empathising with the agent who performed it.

I would suggest many scholars only conceive understanding in the latter sense and thus dismiss the deeds of Nazi perpetrators as inexplicable,⁹³ an error also made by Levi.⁹⁴ Rather, I would argue a 'basic understanding' can be found for perpetrators of Nazi anti-Semitism and indeed is held by Levi, albeit without his being aware of it. One example would be when he explains that if Rudolf Höss had grown up in a different environment he would never have been a criminal but 'at most a careerist of moderate ambition,'⁹⁵ or when he recognises that SS men were formed from 'a few years perverse schooling and the propaganda of Dr. Goebbels'⁹⁶ in 'which current morality was turned upside down.'⁹⁷ 'I understood that it was foolish to talk of evil Germans: the system was demonic, the Nazi system was capable of dragging everyone down the road of cruelty and injustice... It was extremely hard to break out of.'⁹⁸ Here he is holding a 'basic understanding' in terms of

87 See Afterword by Levi to *The Truce*, p. 395-396

88 'The Drowned and the Saved' in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 111 Also see Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 138

89 Afterword to Levi, *The Truce*, p. 395

90 *Loc. cit*

91 'I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease.' Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 32

92 Formosa, Paul – 'Understanding Evil Acts' in *Human Studies*, Vol 30. No. 2 (Jun 2007), pp. 57-77

93 For example, Clendinnen, Inga – *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 102. Also see Marco Belpoliti in the preface to *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 83

94 'Let me explain: "understanding" a proposal or human behaviour means to "contain it", contain its author, put oneself in his place, identify with him.' Afterword by Levi to *The Truce*, p. 395

95 Levi, Primo - 'Preface to R. Höss's *Commandment of Auschwitz*' in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 83

96 Levi, Primo - 'Preface to H. Langbein's *People in Auschwitz*' in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 80

97 Also see Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 97

98 Levi in 'The Duty of Memory' (1983) in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 244

recognising what Forsena describes as ‘evil-encouraging’ situations – these increase the likelihood that one might perform an evil act – and thus how an individual could have brought himself to perform such a deed. I would argue that even a ‘basic understanding’ can prove a complex undertaking⁹⁹ and should not be simplified but the crucial point is recognising that they are not ‘moral monsters’ a point proven in several psycho-analytical reports on perpetrators of terrible deeds.¹⁰⁰ The valuable effect of this is described by Gobodo-Madikizela: ‘Far from relieving the pressure on them, recognising the most serious criminals as human intensified it, because society is thereby able to hold them to greater moral accountability. Indeed demonizing as monsters those who commit evil lets them off too easily’.¹⁰¹ Therefore this ‘basic understanding’ is crucial to a notion of a common humanity: one recognises that in our shared capacity to enact these terrible deeds we have responsibility to one another in our vulnerable condition to take preventative measures and to ensure such a capacity is not fulfilled - for example seeking ways to minimise ‘evil-encouraging’ circumstances.

Recognising shared responsibility for our actions

A second key point to Levi’s concept of a common humanity is that as a species with shared capacities we must accept responsibility for one another’s actions and in the subsequent ‘shame’ take measures to prevent future fulfilment of our darker potentialities. This is a two-fold argument. Firstly, it is comprised of the idea that the Nazi concentration camps are ‘unique,’ ‘never seen in the history of humanity’:¹⁰² despite all the other massacres and horrors of the twentieth century ‘the Nazi concentration camp still remains a *unicum*, both in its extent and quality’.¹⁰³ I would suggest that this is reflected in a common incapacity to believe what has occurred¹⁰⁴ or an inability by the victim to describe what they have been through.¹⁰⁵ In its ‘uniqueness’ the Holocaust marks a new level of depravity to the depth man can sink in enacting evil: it proved ‘that man, the human species – we, in short – were potentially able to construct an infinite enormity of pain’.¹⁰⁶ This leads to his

99 See Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla – *A Human Being Died that Night: Forgiving Apartheid’s Chief Killer* (London: Portobello Books Ltd. 2003) p. 55

100 For example see Sereny, *Into that Darkness* and Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. There are also many reports indicating that the people enacting the crimes were constantly drunk and suffered anxiety attacks and mental breakdowns. See Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, p. 194

101 Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night*, p. 119

102 Levi, Primo - ‘A past we thought would never return’ in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 32

103 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 10

104 ‘They did not believe us and for that I do not blame them.’ Vrba, Rudolf and Bestic, Alan – *I Cannot Forgive* (London: Sidwick and Jackson and Anthony Gibbs and Phillips. 1963) p. 249 Even Levi writes – ‘I myself am not convinced that these things really happened.’ *If This is a Man*, p. 109

105 For example, Simon Srebrink, a survivor of Chelumno says, ‘No-one can describe it. No-one can recreate what happened here.’ From *Shoab*, a film by Claude Lanzmann, *The Masters of Cinema Series* (1985).

106 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 66

second point that humanity has been 'shamed' forever. This is articulated at the beginning of *The Truce* when the Russians arrive at Monowitz: Levi describes how their faces marked 'the shame we knew so well... the feeling of guilt that such a crime should exist'.¹⁰⁷ It was a guilt that Levi suffered from after liberation, described in *The Periodic Table*: 'I felt closer to the dead than the living, and felt guilt at being a man, because men had built Auschwitz and Auschwitz had gulped down millions of human beings'.¹⁰⁸ Here Levi is directly postulating a notion of a common humanity in the sense of accepting a 'certain shared responsibility'¹⁰⁹ for the new depth of evil of which humanity has proved capable:

*It is shameful. We are men: we are part of the same human family to which our murderers belonged. Faced with the enormity of the crime, we feel ourselves citizens still of Sodom and Gomorrah, and we cannot feel ourselves exempt from the indictment which our act of witness would prompt an extraterrestrial judge to lay at the door of the whole of humanity.*¹¹⁰

Interestingly a possible form that this 'indictment' may take is given by Robert Nozick who makes an argument very similar to Levi's: 'Like a relative shaming a family, the Germans, our human relatives, have shamed us all. They have ruined all our reputations, not as individuals – they have ruined the reputation of the human family. Although we are not all responsible for what those who acted and stood by did, we are all stained'.¹¹¹ He suggests that, in Levi's words an 'extraterrestrial judge,' would now not see it as a 'special tragedy' if humankind ended: not that it deserves to be destroyed but rather that it simply no longer deserves to 'be.' Nozick's argument for humanity as 'stained' is echoed by Levi's constant reference to Auschwitz as a form of 'poison',¹¹² a 'pestilence'¹¹³ to which nobody is immune¹¹⁴ and which similar to Camus' plague may re-emerge:¹¹⁵ 'heavy, threatening, sensations of an irreparable and definitive evil, which was present everywhere, nestling like gangrene in the guts of Europe and the world, the seed of future harm'¹¹⁶ a thought echoed by Rousset, another concentration camp survivor.¹¹⁷ It is because Shoah has been

107 Levi, *The Truce*, p. 188

108 Levi, Primo – *The Periodic Table*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Penguin Books, 2000) p. 126

109 'Words, Memory and Hope' in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 253

110 'Deportees Anniversary' in Levi, *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 32

111 'The Holocaust' in Nozick, Robert – *The Examined Life* (London: Simon and Shuster, 1989) p. 238

112 Nazism 'led to a proliferation of hatred that to this day poisons Europe and the world.' 'The Commander of Auschwitz' in Levi, *The Mirror Maker*, p. 103. Repeated in Levi, *The Truce*, p. 378

113 Levi, *The Periodic Table*, p. 107

114 Levi, Primo – 'Deportees Anniversary' in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 32

115 'The plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely... it can remain dormant for dozens of years... the day will come when, for the instruction or misfortune of mankind, the plague will rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city.' Camus, Albert – *The Plague* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001) p. 237

116 Levi, *The Truce*, p. 373

117 'The evil cannot be measured against military triumphs. It is the gangrene of a whole economic and social system. Its contamination still spreads far beyond the ruined cities.' Rousset, *A World Apart*, p. 109

an 'actuality' that it remains a 'sinister potentiality',¹¹⁸ always within our capacity and thus humanity will 'never again be able to be cleansed'.¹¹⁹ I would suggest that Levi's argument here can be linked in with a metaphor of 'pollution,' a term which can be traced back to the ancient Greeks as *miasma*. This was a condition of contagious impurity possibly caused by a morally outrageous act linked to the verb *mianinō* which can be used for the pollution of a reputation through unworthy deeds. It is associated with other words which reference notions of 'dirtiness' overlapping with ideas of collective responsibility.¹²⁰ The difference is that the pollution posited by Levi is meant to mark an irrevocable change in our individual and collective existence, a new depth to human evil has been plumbed and thus we have all been contaminated by the events.

With respect to the concept of a common humanity a notion of shame in terms of a 'human family' acknowledges a collective responsibility for the capabilities of man, encouraging us to prevent a re-emergence of the 'pestilence' in us which brought about Auschwitz. Jaspers points out 'he who feels absolutely safe from danger is already on the way to fall victim to it'¹²¹ and in this respect I would suggest that Levi is invaluable, for by raising awareness of our capabilities one can always be on guard - 'armed' and ready¹²² - against them. However, I also would add that it is an argument which is not without difficulties. Firstly, one must heed an important differentiation between guilt and shame: the latter is an acknowledgement of the fact that we must rise in truthful moral responsiveness to the meaning of what we have been caught up in, often through no fault of our own and so involves an acceptance of responsibility.¹²³ Using Jaspers' categories, 'moral guilt'¹²⁴ is acknowledgement of the wrongs an individual has committed by deed or omission. Thus humanity cannot be 'guilty' of the crimes¹²⁵ of the Holocaust but they can be 'shamed'.¹²⁶ Levi is sometimes erroneous in using the two words interchangeably.¹²⁷ My second point is that '*miasma*' in its various forms was understood by the Greeks as that which could be 'cleansed'.¹²⁸ Whilst Nozick notes that we need to find a means to 'redeem'

118 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 273

119 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 66. First postulated in *If This is a Man*: 'Can Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination... which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?' Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 135-136

120 Information from Parker, Robert - *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1990)

121 Jaspers, Karl - *The Question of German Guilt*, translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) p. 93

122 Levi, *The Periodic Table*, p. 187

123 Definition by Gaita, Raymond - *A Common Humanity* (Routledge: London, 1998) p. 92

124 Jaspers, Karl, *German Guilt*, p. 25

125 In the same way Levi quite rightly argues that we cannot speak of a collective German guilt. See Canon, *Conversations*, p. 24. Also Levi in 'Round Table: The Jewish question' in *The Voice of Memory*, p. 181

126 Presumably Jasper here would suggest that we are in terms of his category 'metaphysical guilt.' Given the theological grounding for his argument this is not a discussion I shall enter into here. For more see Jaspers, *German Guilt*, p. 27

127 For example Levi, *The Truce*, p. 188

128 Parker, *Miasma*, p. 104

ourselves he offers no solution,¹²⁹ and it is not a subject broached by Levi presumably because he does not consider it a possibility. Indeed, once such evil has shown to be in our capacity it is not a 'pestilence' which can be removed. However, my concern is that if we take as true Nozick's argument that 'unredeemed' it is no longer a tragedy for humanity not to 'be' then how can we take seriously demands for responsibility? One is left feeling so overwhelmed by evil that one may be encouraged to inaction. Furthermore the action one may choose to take in an attempt to 'purify' can prove negative rather than positive: for example Enzensberger argues that an individual suffering a defilement of nature will look to cleanse himself by going away or doing away with himself altogether.¹³⁰ If each member of humanity chose to take such recourse then the dangers of annihilation are as potent as if people succumbed to their fundamental traits: responsibility has not led to preventative measures. I would suggest this problem can be overcome by articulating another necessary component to a concept of a common humanity only mentioned briefly in Levi's works. It is this that I shall turn to in part three.

PART THREE

A revised perception of a common humanity, post-Holocaust

I have argued that Primo Levi shows the human condition to be fundamentally tragic and thus necessitates a concept of a common humanity as recognition that we are a species of people vulnerable to one another's shared potential capacities – this encourages responsibility in terms of taking preventative measures. I suggested that a 'basic understanding' of perpetrators' actions by Levi allows one to recognise our potential *qua* human to enact these terrible deeds and that we have responsibility to one another in our vulnerable condition to ensure such a capacity is not fulfilled. Similarly that Levi's view concerning the 'human family' as 'shamed' by the new depth of evil which Shoah marks man able of encourages us to take responsibility in being 'armed' against it. However, I argued that without any possibility for being 'redeemed' there is the threat of inaction – failing to see any point in taking responsibility. Perhaps one possible embodiment of this is Lorenzo, a voluntary civilian worker to whom Levi owed his life in the camps.¹³¹ Upon his return back to Italy, Levi goes to visit him but finds Lorenzo a 'tired man' – 'his margin of love for life had thinned, almost disappeared... He had seen the world, he didn't like it,

129 Nozick, *The Examined Life* p. 240

130 Enzensberger, *Smut*, p. 77

131 He gave Levi soup everyday as described by Levi, *If this is a Man*, p. 125

132 Story is told in 'Lorenzo's return' in Levi, *Primo – Moments of Reprieve*, p. 147-160

he felt it was going to ruin. To live no longer interested him'.¹³² The sadness of Lorenzo's story is that it is people such as himself who are 'like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness' which comprises the tragedy of human existence – if more stories such as his could be told 'how utterly different everything would be today'.¹³³

It is this respect that I want to tentatively put forward another feature of our common humanity which isn't explored by Levi but which satisfies his concept of a common humanity and which I would suggest overcomes the potential problem of 'inaction.' This is our capacity for choice. It was violated to the extreme in Nazi Germany, where evil became so 'banal' that choices between evil and evil were considered everyday affairs,¹³⁴ and removing the ability for moral decisions was also a key part of the process in reducing their victims to 'living corpses'.¹³⁵ Like other features of our humanity discussed earlier, it is a deeply vulnerable aspect of human nature, but – I would suggest – it is because it is so susceptible to the surrounding environment and the people we co-exist with that it postulates a necessity for responsibility.

I want to argue that if, as I have shown in this essay, we have to acknowledge our moral capacity for evil, then equally we have to acknowledge our capacity for good. I quote Otto, an individual awarded the Yad Vashem medal for his bravery saving Jews during the Nazi regime: 'On my medal... there is an inscription. It says. "Whosoever saves one life, he has saved the entire humanity." And I think the inversion of that is also true. Whoever kills one innocent being, it is as if he has killed the entire world'.¹³⁶ His quote highlights an important symmetry to the concept of a common humanity: in the same way it allows us to recognise the shame we all suffer as a result of the Holocaust and the new depths of evil it signifies it can equally allow one to celebrate and feel proud in the capacities of man to undertake good actions. This is remarkably expressed by Levi in a discussion of the moon landings:

[C]onfronted by this latest evidence of bravery and ingenuity, we can feel not only admiration and detached solidarity: in some way and with some justification each of us feels he is a participant... a small particle of merit falls to the human species, and so also to himself, and because of this he feels that he has greater value. For good or evil, we are a single people'.¹³⁷

Here I do not intend to fall prey to 'sentimental generalisations'¹³⁸ – the moral choice

133 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 231

134 For example the chilling description given by Eichmann of the Wansee Conference, *Ibid.* p. 231

135 "Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualistic escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal... the alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder.' See Arendt, *Origins* p. 451

136 In Monroe, Kristen Renwich – *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) p. 206

137 Levi, *The Mirror Maker*, p. 108

138 Warning made by Michael Ignatieff in the Introduction to Levi, Primo – *Moments of Reprieve*, p. 6

is always that of the individual and it is important to recognise this: just as the wrong doer must suffer 'moral guilt' so too only the person who conducts a good deed can fully enjoy its merits. Furthermore I would argue that the tragedy of the human condition means it is far easier to fulfil our potentialities for evil than good. However understanding this allows us to appreciate the value of goodness, as Nussbaum puts it 'the fragility of humaneness'¹³⁹ and the significance of those individuals strong enough to resist their tragic nature and to prove the human capable of good. As Rabbi Schulweis writes: 'paradoxically, confronting goodness may be more painfully challenging than confronting evil... The behaviour of flesh-and-blood rescuers compels me to think long and hard about my own goodness and to imaginatively rehearse my choices in analogous situations'.¹⁴⁰ In the twisted social experiment of the camps, Nazism revealed how vulnerable our ability for choices is: post-Holocaust, one has to appreciate how our decisions are affected by the fellow humans we co-exist with but, the awareness that one can try and resist evil and choose to do good - I would tentatively suggest - could potentially lead to a possible hope for redemption, thus removing the threat of inaction. Of course, neither 'good' nor 'evil' exist in a pure state, they coexist intertwined and thus frequently the moral choices one makes prove complicated quandaries. Yet I would propose that even the intention of doing good is of significance, simply as an attempt 'to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness'.¹⁴¹

A concept of a common humanity is crucial - that we are a 'single people' with shared capacities urges us all to take responsibility in preventing Shoah happening again. This is not a small task as Signorini points out:

*If human nature, as the atrocious historical "experiment" of Shoah has demonstrated, does not produce by itself the antibodies that are needed to avoid its aberration, we can and indeed must, watch out for the conditions (historical, political, sociological) that can allow it to take place again.*¹⁴²

Crucial in preventing such 'conditions' is protecting the fragility of humanity as one perceives it: Auschwitz showed the new depths of existence to which a human can be reduced and this terrible state was a crucial aid to the atrocious deeds Nazism enacted: many perpetrators have described how they were only able to carry out their acts because they didn't perceive the other as human.¹⁴³ Furthermore I would suggest that it is within this awareness of a common humanity that there is an increased likelihood for an

139 Nussbaum, *The fragility of Goodness* p. 399

140 Schulweis, Rabbi Harold - Foreword to Oliner, Samuel P. and Oliner, Pearl M. - *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Macmillan, Inc. 1988) p. xi

141 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 93

142 Signorini, Franca Molino - 'The Duty and Risk of testimony: Primo Levi as Keeper of Memory' in Kremner, *Memory and Mastery*, p. 191

143 Stangl describes how he simply saw the Jews as 'cargo' not people - Sereny, *Into that Darkness*, p. 203

‘intention’ of doing goodness: careful research into altruism has revealed that key to it was ‘a common perception that they are strongly linked to others through a shared humanity. This self-perception constitutes such a central core to altruists’ identity that it leaves them with no choice in their behaviour towards others’.¹⁴⁴ It is in full awareness of the interdependence of our actions and lives that one must take responsibility for our tragic capacities, to protect humanity and good in their fragility, and to meet Levi’s demand to see Auschwitz as ‘a warning dedicated by humanity to itself, which can bear witness and repeat a message not new to history but all too forgotten: that man is, must be, sacred to man everywhere and for ever’.¹⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Primo Levi often compares himself to the Ancient Mariner: the epigraph to his last book *The Drowned and the Saved* marks the ‘anguish’ which comes and makes him tell his ‘ghastly adventure.’ Certainly the comparison holds up with respect to the reader – after reading his books one feels like the wedding guest: ‘He went like one that hath been stunn’d/ And is of sense forlorn:/ A sadder and a wiser man/ He rose the morrow morn’.¹⁴⁶ He is a remarkable chronicler of the Holocaust not least in his capacity to reflect on the ordeal of Shoah outside his own traumatic experience, a key part of which is his perception of the human condition and a concept of a common humanity. Unfortunately, I would suggest that the rational and calm style of his prose has led to common misconceptions concerning his opinions – that Levi feels no ‘resentment’ towards the Nazis,¹⁴⁷ that he was a strong survivor never plagued by the difficulties of his experience,¹⁴⁸ that he had forgiven the Germans for what they had done.¹⁴⁹ In part one of this essay I sought to dispel such a ‘myth’ concerning his perception of humanity in the camps – rather than revealing man as able to uphold ‘dignity’ at all costs the *Lager* highlighted the fragility of such a notion, the speed at which it can be destroyed. Reflecting on the state to which people were reduced in the *Lager* as described by Levi forces one to redefine one’s conception of humanity as being fundamentally tragic: the condition of the *Muselmänner* is a condition we can all rapidly be reduced to and in a bid for survival man is shown as inherently selfish with no sense of solidarity or a fixed morality. Further features of this tragic condition as highlighted by Levi reveal a selfish psyche in a desire to shirk responsibility, a deep urge

144 Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism*, p. 216

145 ‘The Monument at Auschwitz’ – Levi, *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 7

146 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor – ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Other Poem* (Mineola: Dover Publishing, Inc, 1992)

147 See ‘Gemaine Greer talks to Primo Levi’ (1985) in *The Voice of Memory* p. 5 Or ‘Interview for a Dissertation’ by Valabrega, Paola (1981) *Ibid.* p. 145

148 ‘The Essential and the Superfluous’ interview by Di Caro, Roberto (1987) *Ibid.* p. 173

149 ‘To forgive is not my verb. It has been inflicted on me.’ Levi, Primo in ‘The Drowned and the Saved’ an interview by Calcapno, Girogio (1986) *Ibid.* p. 111

to hold power, and the unstable nature of morality in terms of theoretical grounding. This tragic perception often had to be negotiated by Levi with his own enlightenment humanist views resulting in a tension throughout his works between upholding reason as a vital faculty of man whilst recognising that it can be made redundant. I followed in part two to suggest that Primo Levi puts forward a concept of a common humanity as a crucial means for taking action against these destructive traits of our condition by recognising our vulnerability to one another in terms of our shared potential capacities and encouraging responsibility by taking preventative measures against them. I exemplified this by firstly highlighting Levi's argument for understanding one another's capacity to enact evil and secondly that as we have all been implicated by the Holocaust in the sense of being 'shamed' there is a collective responsibility for being armed against man's potentialities. In part three, I proposed that in order to avoid the potential problem of 'inaction' his concept of a common humanity must be extended to include our capacity for choice, a deeply vulnerable feature of the human condition but one which carries the possibility for an intention of 'goodness.' I tentatively suggested that this may be one possible route forward for hope in the 'redemption' of mankind post-Holocaust, a necessity posited by Nozick. Finally I argued that a concept of a common humanity is crucial to preventing an event such as Shoah happening again by forcing us to protect the fragility of our outward humanity and increasing the likelihood of choosing to do a good deed.

In the later years of his life Levi became increasingly fearful that the nightmare they had always held in the camps of their story not being listened to¹⁵⁰ was becoming an increasing reality:¹⁵¹ it is an absolute imperative that this does not happen. Levi's witnessing constantly reminds us of the necessity to uphold a concept of a common humanity in light of the tragic human condition he reveals as a means to encourage human responsibility in a sense of solidarity. Our lives must be constantly spent protecting one another against our shared capacities for harm, for never again must an individual have to experience the 'black hole of Auschwitz'.¹⁵²

150 Levi, *If This is a Man*, p. 66

151 See Levi, Primo – 'Deportees Anniversary' in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, p. 3

152 Phrase used by Levi in 'The Dispute among German Historians' *Ibid.* p. 200

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books by Primo Levi:

1. Levi, Primo with De Benedetti, Leonardo – *Auschwitz Report*, translated by Judith Woolf, edited by Robert S. C. Gordon (London: Verso, 2006)
2. Levi, Primo – *If This is a Man*, translated by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1988)
3. Levi, Primo – *The Truce*, translated by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1988)
4. Levi, Primo – *The Periodic Table*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Penguin Books, 2000)
5. Levi, Primo – *The Wrench*, translated by William Weaver (London: Abacus, 1988)
6. Levi, Primo – *Moments of Reprieve*, translated by Ruth Feldman (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2002)
7. Levi, Primo – *If not now, when?* translated by William Weaver (London: Penguin Books, 2000)
8. Levi, Primo – *Other Peoples Trades*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus. 1991)
9. Levi, Primo – *The Mirror Maker*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 2002)
10. Levi, Primo – *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (Abacus: London, 1989)
11. Levi, Primo – *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, edited by Marco Belpoliti, translated by Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005)
12. Levi, Primo – *Collected Poems*, translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London: Faber and Faber, 1988)

Interviews with Primo Levi:

13. Canon, Ferdinando – *Conversations with Primo Levi*, translated by John Shepley (Vermont: The Marlboro Press, 1989)
14. Belpoliti, Marco and Gordon, Robert (eds.), *Primo Levi, The Voice of Memory: Interviews, 1961-1987* (New York: Polity Press, 2001)

Secondary Literature referenced in text:

Books:

15. Clendinnen, Inga – *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)
16. Monroe, Kristen Renwich – *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)
17. Nozick, Robert – *The Examined Life* (London: Simon and Shuster, 1989)

18. Arendt, Hannah – *The Human Condition* (London: The University of Chicago press, 1998)
19. Gaita, Raymond – *A Common Humanity* (Routledge: London, 1998)
20. Rousset, David – *A World Apart*, translated by Yvonne Myse and Roger Senhouse (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951)
21. Sereny, Gitta – *Into that Darkness: From mercy killing to mass murder* (London: Andre Deutsche Limited: 1974)
22. Vrba, Rudolf and Bestic, Alan – *I Cannot Forgive* (London: Sidwick and Jackson and Anthony Gibbs and Phillips. 1963)
23. Oliner, Samuel P. and Oliner, Pearl M. – *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Macmillan, Inc. 1988)
24. Pugliese, Stanislaw G. (ed.), *The Legacy of Primo Levi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)
25. Homer, Frederic D. – *Primo Levi and the Politics of Survival* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2001)
26. Gordon, Robert – *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
27. Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla – *A Human Being Died that Night: Forgiving Apartheid's Chief Killer* (London: Portobello Books Ltd. 2003)
28. Murdoch, Iris – *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1970)
29. Langer, Lawrence L – *Versions of Survival: the Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982)
30. Langbein, Hermann – *People in Auschwitz*, translated by Harry Zohn (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004)
31. Kremner, Roberta S. (ed.), *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as writer and witness* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001)
32. Arendt, Hannah – *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2006)
33. Arendt, Hannah – *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986)
34. Jaspers, Karl – *The Question of German Guilt*, translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001)
35. Amery, John – *At the Mind's Limits*, translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (London: Granta Publications, 1999)
36. Gordon, Robert S. C. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

37. Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah – *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1997)
38. Enzensberger, Christian – *Smut: An Anatomy of Dirt*, translated by Sandra Morris (London: Calder and Boyars, Ltd. 1972)
39. Druker, Jonathan – *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)
40. Giuliani, Massimo – *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003)
41. Celan, Paul – *Selected Poetry and Prose*, translated by John Felstiner (London: W. W. Norton Company and Co, 2000)
42. Parker, Robert – *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1990)
43. Nussbaum, Martha. C. – *The fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)
44. Camus, Albert – *The Plague* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001)
45. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor – *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Other Poems* (Mineola: Dover Publishing, Inc, 1992)

Articles:

46. Howes, Dustin Ellis – 'If this is a person and the possibility of community:' prepared for 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, August 28-31, 2003
47. Formosa, Paul – 'Understanding Evil Acts' in *Human Studies*, Vol 30. No. 2 (Jun 2007), pp. 57-77.
48. Hartmann, Dieter, D – 'Anti-Semitism and the Appeal of Nazism' in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 5. No. 4 (Dec 1984)

Secondary Literature consulted not referenced in text:

Books:

49. Wiesenthal, Simon – *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (New York: Schocken Books Inc, 1998)
50. Lang, Berel – *Philosophical Witnessing: The Holocaust as Presence* (USA: Brandeis University Press, 2009)
51. Lang, Berel – *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990)
52. Griswold, Charles – *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Articles:

53. Govier, Trudy – 'Forgiveness and the Unforgivable' in *American Philosophical*

Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 1(Jan. 1999) pp. 59-75

54. Jaffe, Ruth – ‘The Sense of Guilt within Holocaust Survivors’ in *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 32, No 4. (Oct. 1970) pp. 307-314
55. Holmgren, Margaret. R. – ‘Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons’ in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 30. No. 4 (Oct 1993) pp. 341 – 352
56. Gerrard, Eva – ‘Forgiveness and the Holocaust’ in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 5. No. 2. (Jun 2002) pp. 147-165

Other sources:

57. Freddie Knoller talk, ‘Survival, Memory and Testimony: Personal Perspective on the Holocaust’, Senate House, London – 1st February 2010
58. *Shoah* – a film by Claude Lanzmann, *The Masters of Cinema Series* (1985)

© Naomi Barker 2011

The right of Naomi Barker to be identified as the publisher of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Editorial team: *Rev Alex Jacob*

Concept and design: *www.thirteenfour.com*

Printed through A-Tec, Broxbourne, England

Olive Press
(a CMJ ministry)

EAGLE LODGE, HEXGREAVE HALL BUSINESS PARK,
FARNSFIELD, NOTTS. NG22 8LS
REGISTERED UK CHARITY NUMBER 293553