

The inegalitarian God and the ethics of fortune: on Primo Levi's atheism

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RESUMO

O DEUS DESIGUAL E A ÉTICA DA FORTUNA:
SOBRE O ATEÍSMO DE PRIMO LEVI

Este ensaio examina o ateísmo de Primo Levi. Primeiramente, reconstruo a reflexão de Levi sobre o acaso em *Se Isto É um Homem* como núcleo de sua compreensão universalista da experiência concentracionária. Em Levi, a fortuna – uma resignificação moralizadora do acaso – representa a contingência que decide sobre uma existência humana dramaticamente marcada pela desigualdade fundamental entre os *afogados* e os *salvos*. Esse é o pano de fundo filosófico do capítulo “Outubro de 1944”, no qual Levi esboça sua primeira tentativa de antiteodiceia, a partir da qual delinea as bases de sua ética da fortuna. Em segundo lugar, ao estender o escopo cronológico de minha análise até a década de 1980, defino o ateísmo filosófico de Levi em termos de antiteodiceia social. Mostro como a questão da desigualdade, natural e política, constitui a suprema contradição para uma compreensão teísta da Providência, cuja intervenção no mundo humano tende a ampliar as estruturas onto-antropológicas de dominação política. Finalmente, examino o conto de 1971 “Agentes de Negócio” (“Procacciatore d'affari”), no qual Levi esboça a estrutura conceitual de uma ética da fortuna, na qual a escolha do acaso constitui o ato igualitário fundamental para desativar o dispositivo teológico e político do privilégio.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Primo Levi; Ateísmo; Fortuna; Desigualdade; Teodiceia; Mal; Acaso; Darwinismo

ABSTRACT

THE INEGALITARIAN GOD AND THE ETHICS
OF FORTUNE: ON PRIMO LEVI'S ATHEISM

This essay examines Primo Levi's atheism. First, I reconstruct Levi's reflection on chance in *If This Is a Man* as the core of his universalist understanding of the concentrationary experience. In Levi, fortune – a moralizing resignification of chance – represents the contingency that decides upon a human existence dramatically marked by the fundamental inequality between the *drowned* and the *saved*. This is the philosophical background of chapter *October 1944*, where Levi outlines his first attempt of anti-theodicy, from which he sketches the basis of his ethics of fortune. Second, by extending the chronological scope of my analysis up to the 1980s, I define Levi's philosophical atheism in terms of social anti-theodicy. I show how the question of inequality, natural and political, constitutes the supreme contradiction for a theistic understanding of Providence, whose intervention in the human world tends to increase the onto-anthropological structures of political domination. Finally, I examine the 1971 short story “The brokers”, (“Procacciatore d'affari”) in which Levi outlines the conceptual frame of an ethics of fortune, in which the choice of chance constitutes the fundamental egalitarian act to deactivate the theological and political dispositive of privilege.

KEYWORDS

Primo Levi; Atheism; Fortune; Inequality; Theodicy; Evil; Chance; Darwinism

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1. Moral Atheism

«What convinces us that atheism is the most abominable state one can be in is but a false prejudice concerning the lights of the conscience, which are imagined to be the rule of our actions in the absence of a proper examination of the true springs that make us act» (Bayle, 2000, § 133, p. 165). Far from solely being a treatise against popular superstition, Pierre Bayle's *Various Thoughts On The Occasion of a Comet* (1682) conveys «a far more disturbing message» (Mori, 2021, p. 127): the moral legitimacy of atheism. As Gianluca Mori pointed out, Bayle not only claimed the possibility that morality may be compatible with the lack of faith (something attested by several prominent figures of our philosophical tradition, such as Epicurus or Spinoza). He even dared to suppose the moral superiority of atheism insofar as the «deeds of those who do not believe in God are dictated purely by reason» (Mori, 2021, pp. 130-131). Hence, atheists act beyond self-interest, that is neither in view of a reward nor because of the fear of being punished by an all-powerful and righteous God, without whom no justice is thought to be possible. This eventually leads to an even more outrageous hypothesis, that of the «society of atheists» (Bayle, 2000, p. 200), which, by extending the considerations on the virtuous atheist to the social and the political, would be not only possible, but also better than a society ruled by religion, where fanaticism and intolerance had constantly undermined the common good (Mori, 2021, pp. 132-137).

The Arunde had never held metaphysical convictions. They alone, among all their neighbors, had no churches or priests or witch doctors, and expected no help from the sky, or the earth, or the underworld. They didn't believe in rewards or punishments, their land was not poor, they devised just laws by means of a quick and humane administration, they didn't know hunger or discord, they had a popular culture that was rich and original, and they often celebrated with festivals and banquets [...]. The Arunde attributed little value to the survival of the individual, and none to national survival. Every one of them was taught from infancy to esteem life exclusively in terms of pleasure and pain, including in that evaluation, naturally, also the pleasures and pains each person's behavior caused his fellow

man. When, in the estimation of each individual, the balance leaned consistently toward the negative, when a citizen claimed to give and get more pain than joy, he was invited to an open discussion before the council of elders, and if his judgment was substantiated, the conclusion was encouraged and facilitated. After his discharge, he was conducted to the zone of the ktan fields. Ktan is a grain that is very widespread in the area, and its seed, winnowed and ground, is used in making a kind of flatbread; if the ktan is not winnowed, it carries with it the very tiny seeds of a grass weed that has both toxic and narcotic effects (Levi, 2015, p. 593).

In the 1971 short-story *Heading West*¹, Primo Levi seems to resorts to the myth of the «virtuous atheist» to depict a fictional society where the absence of «metaphysical convictions» increases human freedom in the face of the inevitable destiny of death. Like the lemmings, mammals affected by a paradoxical will to death, the Arunde are eventually found to lack in their blood the «Factor L», the active ingredient of the will to live that drives any living being. However, even when offered a cure, the Arunde, whose freedom of suicide is leading their population to a relentless extinction, declines: «We prefer freedom to drugs and death to illusion» (Levi, 2015, p. 595).

Many had seen in Levi's depiction of the lemmings and the Arunde the sign of the depression he suffered for all his life. They were wrong. Levi's position in *Heading West* lies elsewhere, that is behind the voice of anthropologist Walter, who embodies a sort of Darwinian response to Arunde's morality.

Every drug—in fact, any medical intervention—*makes the unfit fit*. Would you want to question every drug and every doctor? For centuries the human race has chosen this path, the path of artificial survival, and it doesn't seem to me that the result has been detrimental. Humanity has had its back turned to nature for a while now; it's made up of individuals and puts all its efforts into the survival of the individual, into prolonging life, and into vanquishing death and pain (Levi, 2015, p. 59)².

In *Heading West*, the modern myth of the virtuous atheist is filtered through Levi's scientific mindset. The ethical-anthropological outcome of atheism is a fighter, not a resigned Stoic. Behind the misleading thanatological readings of this short story, there is more than an obsessive insistence on the biography of an intellectual figure who masterfully intertwined *bios*, *graphos* and *logos*. We can also detect a well-rotted moralistic bias of our philosophical tradition: the inevitable existential desperation of the atheist.

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1. For a reconstruction of the sources of *Heading West* see D. Scarpa, *Postfazione*, in Levi, 2024, pp. 274-277.
2. I allowed myself to slightly change Jenny McPhee's translation «makes the unadaptable adaptable» into «makes fit unfit». In my opinion, it better expresses the Italian «ogni intervento medico, rende *adatto* un *inadatto*», which conceals a crypto-quotation from Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. Cf. S. Ghelli, 2024, p. 177.

Primo Levi never hid his atheism: «There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God» (Camon, 1989, p. 68), he claimed in a well-known interview with Ferdinando Camon from 1986. The ultimate prefiguration of an inner weight destined to drown him few months after. For many interpreters, to invoke the biographical data seemed to be the only way to explain the radicality of Levi's statement, an author who, on the contrary, accustomed his readers to intellectual virtues such as moderation, measure, calm and sense of nuances (Levi, 2012, pp. 221-222). This is the bias, a sort of cultural reflex: how could a contemporary authority of morality and knowledge like him be truly atheist? Simply, he could not. As *Psalm 14* claims, «The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God». Camon himself promptly reassure us: few days after, Levi added on the typescript, «I don't find a solution to this dilemma. I keep looking, but I don't find it» (Camon, 1989, p. 68). Sigh of relief: Primo Levi clearly was not clear-headed (Anissimov, 1999, p. 304 and 618)³. Even in the remote case his profession of atheism were to be taken seriously, however we should not worry about it. As Riccardo Di Segni wrote: «Levi's theological thought is dramatically simple [...]. Discussing Providence with Levi is pointless, as well as about his own experience, but, with all respect, one has the impression that when he talks about these topics he lacks theoretical foundation» (Di Segni, 2023, p. 292)⁴.

In the following pages, I will reconstruct Primo Levi's atheism, highlighting not only its largely underrated philosophical profundity, but also how the incontrovertible negation of Providence constitutes the core of his ethics. By taking up Bayle's theoretical challenge, this essay wants also to provoke: Levi represents one of the peaks on twentieth-century political and moral reflection not despite his atheism, but exactly because of it.

Before proceeding further, one premise is necessary: I will assume atheism as an ontological option, not as a personal position toward faith and religion. In other words, I am interested in understanding the role of the negation of theism within Levi's reflection on human condition and, more generally, his view of life. Levi produced well-pondered and articulated argumentations, not simply literary elaborations of his frames of minds. As long as his concept and arguments prove to be consistent with their premises, the tribulations of his heart are of no philosophical interest.

2. Chronicles of «Shameless Luck»

In the conversation with Camon, Levi provided us with an effective key to read *If This Is A Man*:

After my return from Auschwitz, I had a great need to talk, I looked up my old friends and talked their ears off, and I remember their saying to me, «How strange! You haven't changed a bit». I think I'd undergone a process of maturing, having had the luck to survive.

.....

3. See also Nezri-Dufour, 2002, p. 220, and Wiesel, p. 89.

4. Translation mine.

Because it's not a question of strength, but of luck: you can't beat a concentration camp with your own strength. I'd been lucky; for having been a chemist, for having met a bricklayer who gave me something to eat, for having overcome the language difficulty (this I can claim to have done); I never got sick – I got sick only once, at the end, and this too lucky, because I missed the evacuation of the camp. The others, the healthy ones, all died because they were transferred to Buchenwald and Mauthausen in the middle of winter. I had an argument... are you a believer? (Camon, 1989, p. 67)

I am intentionally leaving this quotation pending as we will resume it in due time. For now, I would like to focus on Levi's summary of his first book. When asked to briefly recap his experience, Levi identifies the common thread of survival in fortune. Nothing new: this is exactly how he decided to begin *If This is A Man* forty years before: «It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944», he claimed in the *Preface*, «that is, after the German government had decided, because of the growing scarcity of labor, to lengthen the average life span of the prisoners destined for elimination». (Levi, 2015, p. 5).

If This is a Man can be considered the “chronicle of a lucky prisoner”, a sequence of events in which chance, more than any other skill or natural gift, plays the decisive role in the survival of the protagonist and all the other walk-on parts. But, as Levi clarifies in the chapter *Initiation* (added in the 1958 second edition for Einaudi), such fortune is «shameless», a zero-sum game between the «evident constant misfortune» of some and the «shameless luck» of others (Levi, 2015, p. 35). It is by virtue of such disequilibrium, where blind chance betrays a sort of wicked delight to persecution, that Levi, a man of science who thinks only on the basis of empirical evidence, holds to be able to detect general working principles of the human condition: «In history and in life», he claims in the well-known chapter *The Drowned and the Saved*, «one sometimes seems to glimpse a fierce law that states: “To he who has, it will be given; from he who has not, it will be taken away”» (Levi, 2015, p. 84). Levi turns to *Matthew 25, 29* to express the «fierce law» of life which mirrors the «distinct» and «innate» division that marks the human condition: that of between the *drowned* and the *saved* (Levi, 2015, p. 83). As Levi would explain in an interview from 1974:

What I attempted to theorize in the chapter entitled *The Drowned and the Saved* is a certain bipartition of humanity, which is why it seems that human beings are divided naturally, by birth, into two categories: those who go up and those who go down. It is an extremely repugnant fact. It contradicts everything we believe regarding morality or sociology or politics. However, it truly looked so at that time: that there were the upper and the lower, the drowned and the saved, those who win and those who lose [...]. When the convoy, new people, arrived, spontaneous selection occurred after a few days. It was like a sieve: there were those who stay above and those who stay beneath. I have cynically named them the *drowned* and the *saved*, but it was surely not a salvation in a Christian sense [...]. It was rather Darwinian. They were the *fit* and the *unfit* (Collotti, 2017, pp. 40-41).

Such a fundamental inequality defines the existential ground whereon chance acts. As Robert Gordon showed, Levi's «unwritten philosophy of fortune» combines different sources, the Bible, Dante, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, up to modern statistics (Gordon, 2023, pp. 32-35)⁵. A stylistic hybridism of literature and science which finds in Darwinism its ontological core: the blind chance that “moves” natural selection (Darwin, 1859, p. 106)⁶; the «sieve» that, time by time and with no preconceived end, “decides” upon who is *fit* and who is *unfit*. This is exactly what Levi witnessed during the last days in Auschwitz, when being sick suddenly meant being *fit*, a fortunate match with environmental conditions that, at the same time, made the healthy ones, like his dear friend Alberto, unfit.

In Levi, the semantic shift from the neutral notion of *chance* to the more symbolic and literary efficient term of *fortune* serves the purpose of moralizing the existential content of the biographical events he narrates. His inquiry on the human condition turns to the concept of *chance-fortune* to replace what, in his eyes, appears to be theoretically and morally unacceptable: the notion of Providence. The biblical quotation from *Matthew 25,29*, of which Levi intentionally overturns the soteriological message, is not a mere rhetorical decoration. It rather polemically emphasizes a crucial conceptual point. The «fierce law of history and life», namely the “cosmic” law of inequality, is surely «repugnant», but conceiving it as the tragic outcome of a blind chance makes it more “ontologically” tolerable, motivating humankind to fight such “natural” injustice rather than stoically accepting its ineluctability. As Levi states, «for a country is considered the more civilized the more the wisdom and efficiency of its laws hinder a poor man from becoming too poor or a powerful one too powerful» (Levi, 2015, p. 83). But it would be utterly outrageous to glimpse in it the guiding principle of divine Providence.

In *If This Is A Man*, chapter *October 1944* contains the most explicit critique to the morality of the theistic notion of Providence. Here, Levi describes the dramatic moments of the selection for the gas chamber, when he vividly experienced «the paralyzing sensation of being utterly helpless, and in the hands of fate» (Levi, 2015, p. 148). «The fact that I was not selected depended almost entirely on chance» (Levi, 2015, p. 120), he promptly clarifies. In his eyes, the «*Selekja*» represents the emblem of the totalitarian delirium of the Lager: an extremely regulated procedure managed by all-powerful executioners, whose absolute free will decide upon prisoners' faith «in the fraction of a second between the two successive crossing, with a glance at front and back». The detached indifference of the Nazis' racial hatred, for which the distinction between *fit* and *unfit* is deliberately pretextual and approximate, leave wide allowances for «mistakes». This is the fault where fortune intervenes.

5. For a wider perspective see Gordon, 2023, pp. 97ff.

6. «I have hitherto sometimes spoken as if the variations were due to chance. This, of course, is a wholly incorrect expression, but it serves to acknowledge plainly our ignorance of the cause of each particular variation».

Levi, whose body was considerably worn-out by 9 months of starvation and slavery, ended up in the right side, that of the *saved*; the «young and robust» René, who past the commission immediately ahead of him, ended up in the left side, that of the *drowned*. «There could have been a mistake with our cards», Levi immediately suspects, «the hypothesis is probable» (Levi, 2015, p. 122). When the night comes, silence prevails in the barrack, and, from his bunk, Levi sees and hears «old Kuhn» praying aloud, «thanking God that he was not chosen». A scene that causes Levi's fury:

Kuhn is out of his mind. Does he not see, in the bunk next to him, Beppo the Greek, who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow, and knows it, and lies there staring at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Does Kuhn not know that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty - nothing at all in the power of man to do - can ever heal? If I were God, I would spit Kuhn's prayer out upon the ground (Levi, 2015, pp. 123-124).

Often read as pages where Levi loses his peculiar emotional and analytical control, the episode of Kuhn's prayer actually overflows with key conceptual elements. First, the juxtaposition between the «old» *saved* and the «young» *drowned*, which consistently reiterates the “law of inequality”: the old who has the chance to get older and the young who dies prematurely. The old-young pair is a very important opposition in Levi's ethical and political understanding of the Lager. Not by chance, forty years later, it would constitute the starting scene of the analysis carried out in *The Gray Zone*, where the *Zugang*, the «new comer» who enters the camps naked and scared, encounters the unforeseen hostility of «old-timer» prisoners intent on protecting their privileged position (*to he who has, it will be given*) (Levi, 2015, pp. 2431-2432).

Second, “Kuhn's ontological misunderstanding”: he does not see the injustice of a younger person dying instead of him because he seems to be unaware «that next time it will be his turn». It is the delusion of a “protection” from the bows of chance, an existential cataract caused by the faith in a God understood as a provident protector. This straightforwardly leads to the conclusion of Levi's reasoning: Kuhn's prayer is immoral; it is a self-interested worship which proves to be completely blind toward other fellows' unjust fate.

In *If This Is A Man*, Levi emphasizes his indignation for Kuhn, thereby posing a moral question that would be completely developed in the following decades, es-

pecially in the 1980s, when the theological reflection becomes a key turning point in the elaboration of his latest ethical and political thought⁷.

Levi would come back on the events of *October 1944* in the chapter *The Intellectual in Auschwitz* of 1986 *The Drowned and the Saved*.

I entered the Lager as a nonbeliever, and as a nonbeliever I was liberated and I have lived until today. In fact, the experience of the camp, its appalling evil, confirmed my agnosticism [the Italian is *laicità*, literally “being a layman”. AN]. It prevented me, and still does, from being able to imagine any form of providence or transcendental justice: Why the dying people in cattle cars? children in the gas chambers? Still, I have to admit that (only once) I felt the temptation to give up, to seek refuge in prayer. It was in October 1944, the only time I sensed clearly the imminence of death [...]. For an instant, I felt the need to ask for help and asylum. Then, despite my distress, equanimity prevailed. The rules of the game don’t change when it’s about to end, or when you’re losing. A prayer in that situation would have been not only absurd (what rights could I have claimed? and from whom?) but also blasphemous, obscene, and filled with as much impiety as a nonbeliever can muster. I wiped out the temptation: I knew that otherwise, if I survived, I would have had to be ashamed (Levi, 2015, pp 2517-2518).

Levi’s rejection of prayer is not due to a rigid rationalistic coherence that denigrates others’ religious sensibility. As he claims right after, «the believers had better lives not only in the crucial moments of the selections or the air raids but also in the grind of daily life». Levi never hid a certain fascination for those who found in faith not only an inner drive to survival, but also a powerful ethical resource to resist dehumanization⁸. However, for Levi, the zero-sum game of fortune forces his reflection to assume a wider perspective where the single experiences of survival ethically interact one another. It is not a matter of judging prisoners’ behavior from a moral viewpoint, but rather of bringing to light the deepest “meaning” of a limit experience that, in our time, millions of human-animals shared. Levi’s testimony is characterized by a universalistic vocation (Gordon, 2012) which, through the ideation of an extreme thought experiment (Bucciantini, 2019, pp. 43-44), leverages on the exceptional condition of Auschwitz to infer dynamics concerning humankind as a whole (Levi, 2015, p. 82).

7. It is worthy to note that the question of God would mostly recur in the interviews from the 1980s. This is to be ascribed to demanding curiosity of the interlocutors toward Levi’s relationship with Judaism and faith. Such demand came not only from Jewish interpreters, as the case of Daniela Amsallem, but also from Catholic readers, such as Ferdinando Camon and Giuseppe Grieco. This may explain Levi’s peremptory, and sometimes provocative, attitude, as well as his tendency to radicalize positions which, in the same period, would be exposed more thoughtfully in his books. As for the Grieco’s interview, Levi left a biting comment in a letter to Guido Lopes from June 1984: «When he came to visit me», he writes, «Grieco [*sic*] seemed to me a bit air headed. One of those Catholics (perhaps well-intentioned) who believes that Jewish people have, as he said to me, a leg up, and the red telephone with God the Father». Cf. Lopez, 2024, p. 45.

8. On this see, for instance, the 1978 short-story *The Cantor and the Veteran*. Cf. Levi, 2015, pp. 1379-1384.

As he would write in the 1965 school edition of *The Truce*: «The Lager has a universal meaning; it has become the very symbol of human condition, and it represents the death that nobody can avoid» (Levi, 2016-2018, p. 1406)⁹. Therefore, the ethical-existential relevance of Kuhn's prayer lies not in its singularity, but in its being one of the many tiles of the wider tragedy of the *drowned-saved* division.

What Levi writes in *The Intellectual in Auschwitz* is the outcome of a long-lasting ethical reflection on chance, whose most radical considerations can be traceable in some previous interviews from the early 1980s. In a conversation with Daniela Amsallem from July 1980, Levi acknowledges a certain literary re-elaboration of the facts narrated in *October 1944* to «impress the reader». This ended up emphasizing a sense of guilt for the «mistake» with René that was completely silenced by the monadic will to survive that afflicted any prisoner in Auschwitz (Levi, 2018, p. 880). However, in this out-loud and extemporary considerations, Levi introduces an important conceptual nuance: «René was an Italian and I met his widow later on. I did not dare tell her that [a mistake] could have happened. I surely felt the trauma of selection, but not a sense of guilt. If it were depended on me, if I had tried to deviate the selection, then it would have been my fault». The idea of “deviating the selection” conveys the immorality of a mental act intentionally aiming at directing the unpredictable bows of fortune to other fellows' disadvantage¹⁰. One year later, Levi would better define such intuition during an interview with Paola Valabrega:]

My attitude is one of respect for believers but of substantial indifference at a personal level. I would never even think of signing up to any religion, it's not a need I feel. Not that I am always happy with what I do or have done, but I remember very clearly the moment during the October selection, described in *If This is a Man*, when it came to my turn and I felt the impulse to pray. Then, I thought to myself, the prayer would be blasphemous, to turn to God only when I needed him, and I desisted. I censored myself (Levi, 2001, pp. 144-145).

In 1981, the unlikely possibility to intentionally “deviate” the selection – a paradoxical scenario which, in Amsallem's interview, clearly betrays the emotional involvement of a former victim who, as such, feels morally innocent -, is refined by the idea that an opportunistic prayer in the face of the concrete possibility of death is immoral, especially when invoked by a non-believer. «I said to myself: “Well done, if you were to pray now, you would be a coward”», Levi would claim one year after during an interview with Giovanni Pacchioni (Poli and Calcagno, 1992, p. 274)¹¹. This is a clear example of Levi's moral inflexibility; the expression a well-rooted Kantianism

9. Translation mine.

10. On this see Valabrega, 2023, pp. 107-112.

11. Translation mine. Unlike what he previously told to Valabrega, here, Levi claims: «I felt in peace with myself for not having felt the need to pray either in Auschwitz».

that moves his ethical speculation (an aspect that still awaits to be properly inspected by interpreters), and which goes at the same pace to a Manzonian *caritas* towards human fragility. Two parallel theoretical stances, between which stands the conviction - polemical towards any hasty form of psychologism and biologism – of the irreducible ethical responsibility of the human subject.

In an interview with Giuseppe Grieco from 1983, Levi seems to have figured out his thoughts more effectively.

In Auschwitz I had only one moment of religious temptation. It happened during the great selection of October 1944 [...]. In short, I tried to commend myself to God, and I recall, with shame, having said to myself: «No, you can't do this, you don't have the right. First, because you don't believe in God; secondly, because asking for favours, without having a special case, is the act of a *mafioso*». The moral of the story: I gave up the doubtful comfort of prayer and I left it to chance, or whoever else it might be, to decide my fate (Poli and Calcagno, 1992, p. 275).

A non-believer who prays in the face of the most extreme ordeal is immensely opportunistic, not to say coward. However, what really irritates Levi are the collective ethical implications of such a last-moment retraction: it would represent the request of an ultimate “privilege”, that is the elevation to God of the anthropological drama of the *drowned-saved* division that in Auschwitz occurs «with the lid off, in plain view» (Collotti, 2017, p. 41)¹². From these considerations, which saturate the ethical meaning of the facts of *October 1944*, emerges, by contrast, the egalitarian response of the “virtuous atheist”: to accept the outcomes of chance, letting fortune hit blindly who is to be hit.

It is worth repeating that Levi's theoretical goal is not the moral judgment of human behavior in a state of oppression. His judgment lies elsewhere, upwards. If finitude needs to be understood with tact and sympathy, pondered case by case; on the contrary, moral judgment becomes necessary and categorical if we direct our gaze to God, the recipient of such a prayer. What if Kuhn was right in thanking him?

3. Social Anti-Theodicy, or the Unjustifiable Evil of Inequality

«Today I think that if only because an Auschwitz existed no one in our age should speak of Providence» (Levi, 2015, p. 150). In *If This Is A Man*, the negation of the existence of God is a well-visible theoretical feature of Levi's reflection. As the episode of Kuhns' prayer shows, atheism establishes the clear ontological separation between the godless world of the ethics of chance and the immoral dimension of Providence. The protasis «if I were God» that ends *October 1944* conceal a subtle *argumentum ad absurdum* to stress the inconsistency of the theistic hypothesis: *if God were truly God*,

.....
12. Translation mine.

then he would surely reject Kuhn's self-interested worship. The subject *I* of this conditional sentence is the non-believer who refuses the privilege of divine salvation to embrace the indifference of blind chance, who saves and drowns purposelessly. In other words, Levi's *argumentum ad absurdum* replaces Kuhn's sectarian God with the "virtuous atheist" who acts according to «equanimity» just as the God of theism, namely the First cause endowed with absolute moral attributes (Mori, 2021, pp. 12-21), should do.

By challenging Providence on the terrain of morality, Levi nails God to its moral perfection. And since God did not act accordingly «in history and in life», three options remain: either God is evil (the sectarian Providence worshipped by Kuhn) or he exists, but he is indifferent to humans' fates, hence not provident (Levi, 2001, p. 276), or, finally, he does not exist. As Levi, by recalling Epicurus' quadrilemma, claims during the interview with Grieco:

That is how things stand for me: either God is all-powerful or he is not God. But if he exists, and is thus omnipotent, why does he allow evil? Evil exists. Suffering is evil. Thus if God, at his bidding, can change good into evil or simply allow evil to spread on Earth, then God is bad. And the hypothesis of a bad God repels me. So I hold on to the simpler hypothesis: I deny him (Levi, 2001, pp. 275-276).

Levi's philosophical atheism can be located in the wake of the centuries-old tradition of Western atheism, from Epicurus and Lucretius to Pierre Bayle and Voltaire's *Candide*, up to Charles Darwin. It also presupposes an interesting polemic confrontation with the "Catholic" sources of his ethical and political thought, such as Dante and Alessandro Manzoni. This proves the profound philosophical character of his reflection on God, which can be tracked back to his twofold mindset of modern man of science and «classic moralist» (Tesio, 2018, p. 63). For Levi, what is at stake with concept of God is not the idea, rationally plausible, of a first impersonal cause of the laws of «cosmos», which, if true, «isn't someone to pray to» (Levi, 2001, p. 276). The problem is when the latter becomes supremely "moral", the omnipotent and omniscient Providence who superintended human history. Once again, here we can detect the rationalist echoes of a modern atheism *a là* Bayle (Ghelli, 2020, pp. 161-177): that moral perfection, without which God would not be such, is utterly contradicted by the imperfection of the world, that is the presence in it of moral and physical evil. In the face of evil, the theistic idea of God falls into pieces. However, in Levi, the argument of evil assumes a very precise account. In his eyes, especially after the "anthropological drama" of the *drowned* and the *saved* he observed in Auschwitz, there is an injustice that, more than violence and suffering, theodicy not only cannot, but it even should not attempt to justify as it would be an evil per se: inequality.

Those who consider Levi's atheism an acute form of existential desperation or, worse, theological incompetence probably read his text roughly. They usually extract the well-known claim «there is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God»

without paying attention to what Levi states few lines before. Because that enthymeme simply was the conclusion of a wider and consistent argument. We can finally resume the quotation from the conversation with Camon we left pending in the previous paragraph.

I had an argument with a believer, a friend of mine from Padua [Nicolò Dallaporta Xydias, NA]. If you remember *The Periodic Table*, he's the one mentioned as «the assistant» in the *Potassium* story. He's a believer but not a Catholic; he came to see me after my release to tell me I was clearly one of the elect, since I'd been chosen to survive in order for me to write *If This Is A Man*. And this, *I must confess, seemed to me a blasphemy, that God should grant privileges, saving one person and condemning someone else* (Camon, 1989, pp. 67-68)¹³.

Levi's atheism leverages on the contradiction between God and evil, but what is truly original in it is the political inflection that he gives to his argument. In Levi's view, the notion of providential salvation is straightforwardly implicated within the power relations among human beings, in and out of Auschwitz. To be saved by God when others drown – the zero-sum game of existence - means receiving a privilege, thereby reproducing the power dynamics – those of the *gray zone* - that make political domination possible. In this respect, Levi's atheism can be considered a social anti-theodicy which, against his beloved Manzoni, denies the morality, hence the existence, of Providence since its intervention would simply contribute to further increasing the already unbearable number of inequalities gripping the human world.

Starting from the 1980s¹⁴, the episode of Dallaporta's visit would provide the theoretical core of Levi's atheism, his "invincible" argumentation against theodicy: *if God is inegalitarian, then he cannot exist*. Always by moving from a biographical episode, Levi completes the a-theological reflection begun in *If This Is A Man*. The moral-ontological flaw of form that he glimpsed in Kuhn's prayer is now clearly brought into focus: what is morally unbearable is not human request for salvation, but the fact that God may accept it. If the God of theism is true, then he must be egalitarian. "Either all or none", this is Levi's crux: either God saves everyone (to save nobody would make him metaphysically worthless) or he is "fascist-like", the greater giver of privileges, whose intervention seals from above the «New Order on an "aristocratic" basis», whereof Auschwitz was the horrendous anticipation (Levi, 2015, p. 1198). The action of Providence turns to mirror the «fierce law of life», thereby making God responsible for the endless reiteration of the cosmic injustice of inequality that twentieth-century Fascisms elevated to their political guiding principle. It is the monstrous figuration

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13. Emphasis mine.

14. Within the *corpus* of interviews, the first occurrence is in 1980 conversation with Daniela Amsallem (Levi, 2018, p. 978). In 1983, Levi would allude again to it with Grieco (Levi, 2001, p. 275). Finally, the anecdote of Dallaporta would be mentioned during a conference for the schools of the city of Pesaro in 1986 (Levi, 2018, p. 761), the same year of Camon's interview.

of the “Axis” between God and Fascism, the alliance of the transcendent and earthly injustices of privilege that, in Auschwitz, produced millions of innocent victims. All this so that Levi could write a book?

4. Choosing Chance, in the Name of the Drowned

Do you feel shame because you are alive in the place of someone else? A person more generous, sensitive, wise, useful, and worthy of living than you? You cannot exclude the possibility [...]. It’s just a supposition, or, rather, the shadow of a doubt: that each is a Cain to his brother, that each of us (here I say “us” in a very broad—indeed, universal—sense) has betrayed his neighbor and is living in his place (Levi, 2015, p. 2466).

Levi’s reflections on the universal meaning of the contractionary experience, as abyssal as they end up calling into question God’s justice and existence, eventually land in the chapter *Shame of The Drowned and the Saved*. Here, Levi inspects the convoluted folds of the paradoxical feeling of the “shame of the survivor”. As the quotation shows, such shame expresses, once again, and in the most tragic way, Levi’s understanding of the zero-sum game of human fates, for which to one salvation corresponds one drowning.

Not by chance, the dramatic «supposition» that «each is a Cain to his brother» is immediately followed by the episode of Dallaporta’s visit.

After my return from the camps, I received a visit from an older friend [...]. He told me that my survival could not be the result of chance, of an accumulation of lucky breaks (as I maintained then and still do), but was, rather, the work of Providence. I was one of the elect, the chosen: I, the nonbeliever, and even less of a believer after my time in Auschwitz, had been saved, touched by Grace. Why me, of all people? There is no way to know, he replied. Perhaps so that you would write, and through your writing bear witness [...]. This opinion struck me as monstrous. It hit a raw nerve and revived the doubts I described above: maybe I was alive in someone else’s place, at someone else’s expense. I might have supplanted him, in effect killed him. Those who were “saved” in the camps were not the best of us, the ones predestined to do good, the bearers of a message. What I had seen and experienced proved the exact opposite. Generally, those who survived were the worst [...]. It was not a fixed rule (there were no fixed rules, nor are there in human affairs), but it was still a rule. I felt innocent, to be sure, but herded among the saved and thus in permanent search of a justification, in my own eyes and in the eyes of others. Those who survived were the worst, that is to say, the fittest. The best all died (Levi, 2015, pp. 2466-2467).

These passages represent the most obscured outcome of Levi's testimony. I think that the conceptual common thread that connects *October 1944* and *Shame*¹⁵ allowed us to marginalize the importance of the gloomy biographical conditions, to which, according to some interpreters, we should ascribe the "pessimisms" of Levi's latest reflection. Net of the literary output of these considerations, Levi always refused to bestow a positive meaning on salvation, that is to justify the right of a survival of being such. Because such theodicy, be it religious, political or connected to alleged individual "merits", is completely and obscenely blind towards the mass of the drowned who could not survive. First, in survival, personal skills or merits are not decisive; the last word is always up to fortune. Second, and this is the core of Levi's reflection, even in its most obscured implications, any justification of salvation, namely theodicy, constitutes a justification of inequality. From this, Levi's final jab to divine justice derives: not only Providence is inegalitarian as it saves some and let others drown painfully, but its chosen saved are neither the «best». For surviving in Auschwitz, as well as in any other situation in which life and power intertwine to the point to produce the extreme domination (Forti, 2015, pp. 207-322), meant, despite few extraordinary human exceptions (Levi, 2015, p. 2440), supplanting moral sense, that is failing to fulfill solidarity with one's fellows. «Those who survived were the worst»: the gateway to salvation is privilege, the *instrumentum regni* of inequality. That was the world that Nazis wanted to build; in Levi's eyes, nothing in this world, especially the drama of the *drowned* and the *saved*, authorizes us to think that God wants otherwise.

In a memoir from 2000, Nicola Dallaporta told his version of the meeting with Levi after the liberation.

After the detailed report of his adventure, Levi asked me what he was supposed to do since he survived an exceptional circumstance. Compared to the destiny of the almost totality of his fellow inmates, such an exceptional character of his fate represented a problem that would have become a sort of distressing obsession. I replied that, in my opinion, his salvation, after all miraculous, seemed to me a sort of election by God, who wanted to make him, by destining him to write and publish his memories, the impartial writer of the atrocities he experienced, a precautionary antidote for future generations to avoid committing the same atrocities [...]. Primo violently reacted to my suggestion: he categorially refused to consider for himself any idea of preference, of privilege from God. He did not accept a role that could have distinguished him from others, no matter what the reason for such a distinction was. For him, this distinction was an offense to justice (Dallaporta Xydias, 2021, pp. 30-33).

Dallaporta has no doubt: Levi's standpoint «constitutes one of the basis of his thought». Yet, like Levi, Dallaporta would never change his mind. For him, the collision

15. For a detailed chronological reconstruction of the composition of *The Drowned and the Saved* see M. Mengoni, 2021.

of views with Levi, which never undermined their friendship, was ostensible. His theodicy and Levi's atheism were actually complementary, two existential views, whose unity is, according to Dallaporta, expressed by Christian «greatest» commandment: «love the Lord your God with all your heart» and «love your neighbor as yourself».

Primo's sensibility leads him, at first, towards the love for his «neighbor»; mine towards the love for God. But it is the same thing: those who have the former cannot but have the latter, even if, at first glance, they are not aware of it. Unfortunately, I realized this too late, and I did not make it in time to share this thought with Primo. I think he might have accepted it, although in certain moment of depression and desperation, he ended up claiming that he could not accept God as he permitted the existence of Auschwitz.

It really seems impossible to accept that an eminent intellectual personality like Levi could love his «neighbor», but not God. Dallaporta inevitably connects Levi's radical standpoint to desperation and depression. Levi did not know it, but, unlike the Biblical «fool», in his heart he loved God. Otherwise, what would be the ultimate meaning of his obsession for equality? But Levi's a-theist sense of justice goes exactly in the opposite direction, and this is what I attempted to reconstruct here: to love our neighbor means rejecting Providence and its privileges.

In 1971 *Flaw of Form*, Levi told us the story of another “virtuous atheist”. His name is S., the protagonist of *The Brokers*. Inspired by chapters XVIII and XIX of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), at the time of the publication, Levi considered this short story as «the most serious» he recently wrote (Levi, 2018, p. 52). In my opinion, *The Brokes* constitutes a masterful fictional manifesto of Levi's ethical and political thought. As much as Levi attempted to gather the full existential potential from Auschwitz, the extreme bio-political conditions of the camp prevented him from outlining general criteria of ethical conduct. It would have meant a tactless lack of respect towards a human condition where starvation and the constant risk of dying violently confines «our ordinary moral world» this side of good and evil (Levi, 2015, p. 81). Auschwitz is an utterly compromised situation witnessing the complete collapse of western axiological coordinates, the historical and political «consecration of privilege, of non-equality and non-freedom» (Levi, 2015, p. 1204). In other words, it is not from what went wrong in the concentration camp that we can build an ethical alternative. Auschwitz can only play an «indispensable» precautionary role «to know how to defend our souls should a similar ordeal ever occur» (Levi, 2015, p. 2433). Not by chance, Levi's ethical reflection on Auschwitz “concludes” not with a proposition, but with a question: «How would any of us behave if we were to be driven by necessity and at the same time tempted by something seductive»? (Levi, 2015, p. 2455).

Hence, we should not be surprised that Levi entrusted the propositional definition of his ethics of fortune to a fictional story depicting a sort of «original position» (Corbí, 2012, pp. 21-36), though which establishing the axiological rules of engage-

ments of human existence. From the point of view of the chronological development of Levi's reflection on chance, *The Brokes* ideally stands between *October 1944* and *Shame*, a momentary departure from Auschwitz that would allow him to come back reflecting on his concentrationary experience with a greater theoretical grasp (Gordon, 2003, pp. 142-144). *The Brokes* takes place in a hyperuranic world. Here, the unborn S. is visited by three «officials» intended to propose to him to be born on planet Earth. «A nice place», they ensure, which «the difficult times are in the distant past» (Levi, 2015, pp. 618-619). S. would be part of the human species, of which officials promptly show him seductive animated images portraying happy and healthy individuals. Yet, S. catches sight of pictures that they intentionally hide. They contain troublesome details: wars, economical differences, ethnic conflicts, and so on. «I am not too convinced», he claims, «I don't like this business about being born different—it can only bring trouble» (Levi, 2015, p. 624). S. expresses the desire to see more; he seems «to be particularly sensitive about the subject, or perhaps someone had informed him about it previously». As much as the officials attempts to persuade him that these are marginal cases, S. cannot but notice that most human stories lean to violence and suffering. Official G. invites S. to not overdramatize:

If you think about it a minute, what are fifty million deaths in a population of three billion? Life, you understand, is a unique fabric, even if it has two sides; it has clear days and dark days, it's a web of victories and defeats, but it pays for itself, which is an inestimable good. I know that you people up here have the tendency to frame all your questions on a cosmic scale. But once on Earth you are individuals with only one mind, different from everyone else's, and only one skin (Levi, 2015, p. 629).

S. is inflexible: «you've got to admit that one who is born sick or from malnourished parents» would have much to say against such view. At this point, the brokers play the final card to persuade him. This is how Levi depicts the seductive voice of privilege, the gratifying «theodicy of merit» that justifies our fortunate positioning within the cruel zero-sum game of existence.

It seems to me you've guessed it: someone somewhere made a mistake, and the terrestrial plans reveal a fault, a flaw of form [...]. We've got to find remedies, and we need people like you [...]. We're not here by chance. You were brought to our attention [...]. We urgently need people who are responsible and competent, honest and courageous - this is why we have pursued you and keep pursuing you. We're interested not in quantity but in quality [...]. We can give you some excellent choices, give you good initial advantages, this we can do [...] We'll give you a healthy and agile body, and we'll insert you into a fascinating context: in these quiet places where the world of tomorrow is being built, or into the past, which can be penetrated with new and marvelous instruments. And this is still you, here where wrongs are righted and where justice is done quickly and freely. Or here, too, where pain is

soothed and life is rendered more tolerable, more secure, and longer. The real masters are you—not government leaders or military commanders [...]. You see? There are still a lot of things to straighten out, but none of these miseries will be yours [...]. You won't be born the way others are born; your life will run smoothly, so that your virtues won't be wasted (Levi, 2015, pp. 631-632).

«So», S. replies, «I won't be born at random [...], my destiny is already determined». And it is good destiny, a good deal that will allow him to avoid the evil of the world, the incalculable and unpredictable tribulations that the majority of humanity endures. But this is an unacceptable deal.

I don't want to have advantages right from the start. I'm afraid I'll feel like a profiteer and all my life I'll have to bow my head before each of my friends who didn't have the same privileges. I accept, but I want to be born randomly, like everyone else: among the billions of unborn without a fate, among those predestined to become servants or to fight straight from the cradle, if they even have a cradle. I prefer to be born black, Indian, poor, without amnesties or pardons. You understand me, don't you? You yourself said that each man is his own creator: well, it's better to be so fully, to build oneself from the roots. I prefer to construct myself alone, and to work up the anger that I will need, if I'm able. If not, I'll accept the fate of everyone. The path of humanity, helpless and blind, will be my path (Levi, 2015, p. 632). ●

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