Unthinkable ≠ Unknowable: On Charlotte Delbo's '*Il Faut Donner à Voir*'

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to articulate and defend a new imperative, Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo's *Il faut donner à voir*: "They must be made to see." Assuming the 'they' in Delbo's imperative is 'us' gives rise to three questions: (1) what must we see? (2) can we see it? and (3) why is it that we must? I maintain that what we must see is the reality of evil; that we are by and large unwilling, and often unable, to see the reality of evil; and that if there is to be comprehension of—to say nothing of justice for—the survivors of evil, we nonetheless must.

> This is my sister here, with some unidentifiable friend and many other people. They are all listening to me and it is this very story [the story of Auschwitz] that I am telling ... [I] speak diffusely of our hunger and of the lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash myself as I was bleeding. It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word.
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> Primo Levi[1]

The Holocaust, we are often told, is a mystery, the depths of which can never be fully sounded. If there is one thing that otherwise disparate analysts, historians, and commentators on the Nazi genocide in Europe by and large agree upon, it is that their subject is in some sense incomprehensible. The literature that scholars have generated about the Holocaust is laden with terms like "unthinkable" or "incomprehensible." Such terms are not there without reason. Their presence attests to an encounter with something that stands beyond the limits of our

[1] P. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 60.

common experience, our common endurance, perhaps our common language. In this sense, the Holocaust can never be known. But there is another matter.

Some limitations are born ours, by our nature, and some mysteries therefore are real; but no less certain than this, some are ours to command. Confronted with our limitations, we say: "it will always be a mystery." And of course, some things always will be. But there is that which we *cannot* know: the 'unknowable.' And then there is that which we *would not* know, or have great difficulty knowing. Far too often (albeit not always), that which we call "unthinkable" falls into this latter category. From the fact that we would prefer not to *think* about certain states of affairs (however strongly we might prefer this), that we cannot *know* about said states does not follow. From the fact that we *struggle* to think about certain states of affairs (however mightily we might struggle), that we cannot know about said states does not follow. There is a profound difference between the two categories, much as we might like, consciously or no, to substitute the one for the other. The blinders we impose upon ourselves are seldom of the same quality as those of our finite and limited natures.

This paper is an attempt to articulate and defend a new moral-epistemic imperative, Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo's *Il faut donner à voir*: "They must be made to see."[2] As Lawrence Langer (whose work I will draw upon repeatedly in the pages that follow) once observed, "[f]ew events have done more to create a tension between what we wish and what we know—if we allow ourselves to know it—than the atrocity of the Holocaust."[3] Assuming that the "they" in Delbo's maxim is "us" thus gives rise to the following questions:

(1) *what* must we see?
(2) *can* we see it?

and perhaps most importantly of all,

(3) *why* is it that we must?

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[2] C. Delbo, *Auschwitz and After,* trans. R. C. Lamont (New Haven and London: Yale, 1995), p. x, and *Days and Memory,* trans. R. Lamont (Evanston, Il: Northwestern, 1990), p. vii. Strictly translated as 'It must be given to see,' I will follow Lawrence Langer in translating '*Il faut donner à voir*' as 'They must be made to see' [L. Langer, "Introduction" in C. Delbo, *Auschwitz and After,* trans. R. C. Lamont (New Haven and London: Yale, 1995), p. x]. Both the strict and the interpretative translations are consistent with how Delbo herself used the phrase, and both capture important aspects of her apparent meaning.

[3] L. Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1998), p. 78. The Holocaust is not the only such event, of course, though it is perhaps the paradigmatic instance. One finds similar tensions in the testimony of soldiers returning home from war, and among survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence.

These three questions will be dealt with in numerical succession. I maintain that what we must see is the reality of evil; that we are by and large unwilling, and often unable, to see the reality of evil; and that if there is to be comprehension of—to say nothing of justice for—the survivors of evil, we nonetheless must.

My intention throughout is to draw attention to the moral and epistemic responsibilities we bear when confronted with events that are "unthinkable."

1. What Must We See?

In the background of Delbo's injunction lies what is for many a counterintuitive phenomenon. In the wake of genuine atrocity or enduring violence, as Judith Herman has observed, "the victim's greatest contempt is often reserved not for the perpetrator, but for the passive bystander."[4] Bystanders routinely fail to meet victims with comprehension. And they routinely fail to appropriately respond. Hence, for victims, terms like "incomprehensible" foremost apply to the actions (or inactions) of those in the social milieu that surrounds them. From the victim's perspective, the bystander's innocence—as in going about one's business unaware—is simply not understood to be innocent—as in neither responsible nor without guilt.[5] Even if, on the whole, bystanders genuinely *didn't* know, victims typically conclude that they genuinely *should* have known. Much as is the case under contemporary codes of civil law, ignorance is not recognized as an excuse.

This failure to be met with comprehension, however, is not an obstacle reserved expressly for victims, no matter how cruelly it might isolate them, or leave their situation compounded. When attempting to speak of atrocity, few of us fair any better, academic professionals included. As Lawrence Langer—who spent the better part of his career attempting to articulate the issues under discussion here—once concluded: "The quest for analogy [i.e., an analogy capable of eliciting comprehension] … is the task that bedevils *anyone* aiming to initiate the imagination of an unwary audience into the singular realm of the unthinkable."[6] No matter the distance of the audience from the event, there is a resistance to comprehension that remains intact. The first question before us in regard to Delbo's imperative, therefore, is this: what are we talking about when referring to this failure to see? When we call a realm of events "unthinkable" or "unimaginable," what exactly do we mean?

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[4] J. L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic, 1992), p. 92.

[5] As Delbo herself once wrote: "You who are passing by | well dressed in your muscles | clothing that suits you so well | . . . how can we forgive you for being alive?" [C. Delbo, *Auschwitz and After,* trans. R. C. Lamont (New Haven and London: Yale, 1995), p. 229.].

[6] L. Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1998), p. 64, my emphasis.

As Dan Magurshak once pointed out, uses of terms like "unthinkable" or "incomprehensible" typically fall in one of two categorical directions. For our purposes, I will refer to them as the *affective* and the *conceptual*. In normal usage, when a subject is deemed incomprehensible, the incomprehensibility at issue is conceptual. In such instances, one encounters a subject which "one cannot fully or adequately understand . . . [For example,] in this sense, one may find modern physics incomprehensible."[7] This experience, I take it, is familiar enough.

Affective incomprehensibility, on the other hand, refers to a decidedly different matter. With the affectively incomprehensible, upon the initial encounter (if not upon every subsequent encounter) one finds oneself to a greater or lesser extent affectively *overwhelmed*. Confronted with the fact, for example, of children thrown into a furnace in order to save the expense of a bullet, one simple does not know how to respond. Comprehension fails. In such instances, the very idea of the event in question is, as Magurshak goes on to point out, *empathically* and *psychologically* unimaginable.[8]

What is important to note, however, is that while claims of incomprehensibility in regard to the Holocaust—including those made by some prominent survivors—tend to conflate the two forms, the one does *not* logically entail the other. In principle, one can affirm the empirical fact of burning children, as well as its affective incomprehensibility, while in no way granting that it is somehow conceptually unintelligible.[9] If finding ourselves overwhelmed by the affectively incomprehensible renders us incapable of acknowledging the shape of the world in which we live—a world where such things can and do happen—then Langer may well be correct when he asserts that terms like "incomprehensible" are "nothing more than the name for a reality that we are unprepared to accept."[10]

In this respect, the question of "what must we see" entails a prior question: "what *do* we see?" When it comes to the reality in question, what do we see as real?

Here, a recurring claim from contemporary posttraumatic psychology supplies a plausible answer. Cognitive reactions to unthinkable events, it is often claimed, are primarily comprised of "conservative impulses in the service of maintaining that the world is fundamentally *just*."[11] While this claim (henceforth, the 'just world theory') has been exposited by a number of different sources in a number of different contexts, for our purposes I will

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[7] D. Magurshak, "The Incomprehensibility of the Holocaust: Tightening Up Some Loose Usage," *Judaism* 29/2 (1980), p. 234.
[8] Ibid., p. 234.
[9] Ibid., p. 235.
[10] L. Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1998), p. 65.
[11] A. C. McFarlane; B. A. van der Kolk, "Trauma and Its Challenge to Society" in B. A. van der Kolk; A. C. McFarlane; L. Weisaeth, *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York and London: Guilford, 1996), p. 35, my emphasis.

outline the framework entailed in terms borrowed directly from the work of the psychologist, Ronnie Janoff-Bulman.[12] On this account, the reality that we *are* prepared to accept breaks down into three interrelated aspects or elements:

(1) *The World is Benevolent*. The world—i.e., *our* world, as generalized from our day-to-day experience of it—is simply not seen as a fundamentally malevolent and inhospitable place.[13] The people we know, and around whom we compose our lives, are understood to be predominantly good, and by and large to be trusted. Events, though often trying, usually result in a positive outcome, and when they don't, there is always a "silver lining" to be found. Even if we acknowledge the possibility that it could be otherwise, we seldom do so for long, and we virtually never believe that we, personally, will be affected.

(2) *The World is Meaningful*. Like the Greeks before us, with their *kosmos* over *kaos*, we believe in order on a very deep-seated level. We are in control of our lives. Events in our world do not occur without sense or reason. Misfortune, when it transpires, is neither arbitrary nor haphazard. Rather, it occurs in the context of a regulating social and natural order over which our activities, as groups and individuals, give us a substantial degree of control.

(3) *The Self is Worthy*. The third assumption—that of our own self-worth—is then derived from the other two in a mutually reciprocating manner. Assumed here is a broadly relational view of the self: namely, that through experience of ourselves and others, and the shared understandings of the world through which all such experience is mediated, the self is both formed and brought into consciousness. As the world is understood to be benevolent and meaningful, it naturally follows that outcome will correspond with desert: "'good' people are in charge of their lives, and bad things only happen to 'bad' people."[14] *Deus ex machina*, you deserve what you get, and get what you deserve. Insofar as the world can be experienced as benevolent and meaningful, the self is experienced as worthy; and reciprocally, of course, the same holds true in reverse. In general, we see ourselves as decent, competent individuals. Our intentions are good ones, and our personal qualities are better than the norm.[15]

In its most basic outline, these three aspects comprise the idea of a just world (and in order to give them a fair hearing, bear in mind—much as Sartre once noted—that when it

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[12] R. Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Toward a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 3-25.

[13] There are, of course, exceptions to this claim. For example, individuals meeting the diagnostic criteria of certain psychiatric disorders do appear to genuinely see their day-to-day world as a fundamentally malevolent and inhospitable place.

[14] A. C. McFarlane; B. A. van der Kolk, "Trauma and Its Challenge to Society" in B. A. van der Kolk; A. C. McFarlane; L. Weisaeth, *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York and London: Guilford, 1996), p. 28.

[15] We take ourselves to act, in other words, under 'the guise of the good' [See R. J. Velleman, "The Guise of the Good," *Nous* 26 (1992), p. 3-26.].

comes to our most basic convictions, we do not always really believe what we believe that we do).[16] The claim derived from these premises is roughly as follows: These three basic assumptions comprise a picture of the world as human beings are *inclined* to understand it, a picture around which we perceive events, construct plans, hope for the future, and live our lives. The picture it comprises is for the most part unconscious or pre-reflective. Nonetheless, it is one comprised of presuppositions upon which both the collective and personal narratives we tell ourselves rely. In this sense, then, to follow Hilde Lindemann in borrowing a phrase from Wittgenstein, it forms "a picture that holds us captive." To a significant extent, "disparity between the picture's representation" and actual circumstances encountered in experience simply doesn't count for us "as evidence that the picture is false."[17] As Lindemann points out, "single instances to the contrary—even many of them—haven't much power to alter what everybody knows . . . things are supposed to be the way the [picture shows] them to be, so if they aren't, it's they, not the picture … that have gotten it wrong."[18]

Insofar as the picture thereby serves as what Janoff-Bulman calls "the bedrock of our conceptual system," it can be seen as comprised of a set of "positively biased assumptions . . . that make daily life feel relatively safe and secure."[19] In so doing, it provides us with a sense of reliability in our environment that is necessary to take risks, grow, and explore. While the assumptions entailed do constitute biased (and in that sense erroneous) generalizations, they are nonetheless generalizations that are functional, and in a great many respects positive, taken as a whole. This point will be important to bear in mind throughout what follows.

A provisional acceptance of this psychological model—which I will grant here[20]—provides answers to the first of our questions. From the perspective provided by this model, the answers are almost transparent. While the assumptions entailed by the picture are powerful, primary, often unspoken, and even unrecognized, they are nevertheless *not necessarily true*. What we believe—what it is useful for us to believe, what it is at times necessary for us to believe—is not necessarily that which is true.

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[16] See J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), pp. 86-116.

[17] H. Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 2001), p. 147.

[18] Ibid., p. 148.

[19] R. Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Toward a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 5 and 147 respectively.

[20] As both Janoff-Bulman and McFarlane & van der Kolk point out, the just world theory needs to be assessed in terms of social and cultural location. Citing Buddhism, with its stark assessment of life as suffering, both observe that it will be important to assess the impact that a different, fundamentally less optimistic cultural and religious worldview might have on the phenomena encountered. Some social and cultural locations appearing to be more deeply vested in or resistant to "the facts" than others, it seems reasonable to expect that factors like class, gender, race, and religion can at a minimum mitigate how the just world theory and related phenomena manifest and are expressed. There are many questions here that will need to be addressed.

With that fact in mind, it is not difficult to comprehend the deep cognitive and social rupture created by fundamentally random, malevolent, or meaningless experience. The world (i.e., our world) is simply not seen as a fundamentally random, malevolent, or meaningless place. What *do* we see? A world that is meaningful, benevolent, and comprised of people who are worthy of our trust (including, I might add, ourselves). What *must* we see? Well, considering the Holocaust, the opposite.

Can we see it? Therein lies our next problem.

2. Can We See What We Must?

The short answer typically given to this question is "no." Among those who work with the psychology of trauma, most would agree that regardless of the implications for any given individual, one simply cannot realistically expect people to be able to conceptually perceive what they are not affectively ready to confront. To quote Jonathan Shay, "[w]e should not sit in judgment of those who cannot, in the absence of social support, hear the truth . . . The reasons to deflect, deny, and forget . . . cannot be set aside by wishing them away or by moralizing."[21]

Empirically, this may well be true. Certainly, at a minimum it is a conclusion drawing upon the support of very real evidence. Considered on a case-by-case basis, there is little reason to think that any given individual will be able to do what Delbo's imperative requires him or her to do. In at least a great many cases, the affective incomprehensibility of a state of affairs does appear to severely restrict—if not prohibit—adequate conceptual comprehension. The fact remains, however, that some people live up to Delbo's imperative's demands.

Let us consider the issue in light of some hard evidence. Consider the following, written in April 1933, in Germany, a few short months after the Nazi ascension to power:

> I am afraid that we are merely at the beginning of a process aiming, purposefully and according to a well-prepared plan, at the economic and moral annihilation of all members, without any distinctions, of the Jewish race living in Germany. The total passivity not only of those classes of the population that belong to the National Socialist Party, the absence of all feelings of solidarity becoming apparent among those who until now worked shoulder to shoulder with Jewish colleagues, the increasingly more obvious desire to take personal advantage of vacated positions, the hushing up of the disgrace and the shame disastrously inflicted upon people who, although innocent, witness the destruction of their honor and their existence from one day to the next—all of this

[21] J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), p. 194.

> indicates a situation so hopeless that it would be wrong not to face it squarely without any attempt at prettification.[22]

This terse, prophetic assessment was written by a man named Georg Solmssen. Perhaps remarkably, it does not come from a person with any apparent access to privileged information. Rather, it is an excerpt from an April 9, 1933 internal report of a bank (the Deutsche Bank) to the chair of its board of directors.

To place this excerpt in its historical context, consider the following: on January 30 of that year, a mere two months prior, Hitler ascended to the German chancellorship. At the time, most (not without reason) assumed that he would not last beyond the general elections to be held in early March. On February 27, the Reichstag fire occurred. In the aftermath, the Chancellor was granted emergency powers. During the early weeks of March, almost ten thousand communist party members were arrested and imprisoned at Dachau, which was established for that purpose on March 20. On the March 25, the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act, officially divesting itself and placing full legislative and executive powers in the hands of the new Chancellor. Throughout that month, the first anti-Jewish actions occurred. They were, however, neither officially coordinated nor sanctioned. The first coordinated action—the official, although largely improvised, boycott of Jewish businesses (a boycott to which the larger public proved, in the words of Saul Friedländer, "rather indifferent")—transpired on April 1. Finally, just prior to our date of April 9, the very first racial laws were enacted (April 7).[23]

If Hume was right, and epistemic claims involving future matters of fact can only be accounted for by way of custom or habit—prior experience of similar events in constant conjunction and correlation—how Georg Solmssen arrived at his remarkable assessment raises some interesting epistemological questions. Certainly, he was not the only one who did so. By the time Solmssen wrote his report, for example, many Jewish intellectuals had already fled.[24] The fact remains, however, that the future he predicted would not arrive for almost another ten years.[25]

It is often said that hindsight is not foresight. Hindsight is often clear, foresight—at best—murky. Thus, as Walter Laqueur rightly warns, possessed of the benefit of hindsight,

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[22] See S. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Vol.1: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 33, 342n114.

[23] Ibid., p. 9-27.

[24] Ibid., p. 9.

[25] In fact, there is considerable evidence to support the conclusion that not even the architects of the Holocaust themselves had consciously arrived at their "final solution" beforehand. See, e.g., C. R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy September 1939—March 1942* (Lincoln: Nebraska and Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004).

"nothing is easier than the apportion of praise and blame."[26] In hindsight, there is always the very real danger of retrospectively attributing knowledge that "should have been" to an agent without an adequate appreciation of the concrete realities of the situation that agent was in. Jacob Katz sounds a similar caution when he observes that finding ourselves confronted now with statements uttered under certain circumstances then can easily lead to a distorted perception. "What often happens in such cases is that statements . . . assume, in retrospect, a weight that they were far from having carried in their original setting." Thus, Katz concludes, "only in retrospect do statements made about the future assume the nature of prophesy."[27]

Such cautions are certainly well warranted. Nevertheless, insofar as we are concerned here there lies a deeper, and I would argue more fundamental issue. While Katz's observations may mitigate the force of Solmssen's example, it is hard to see how they negate it. The fact remains that Georg Solmssen genuinely appears to have been aware, at a minimum, of a real propensity entailed by the events of that spring to unfold in a particular unthinkable direction. Strictly speaking, affectively incomprehensible or not, at least part of what Delbo's imperative demands *can be done*. Prospectively, at least, there are instances of people seeing the writing on the wall and responding appropriately from very early on.

The larger question of what enabled them to do so, however, remains an open one.

Here it may be useful to make note of an insightful conclusion drawn by Victoria Barnett in her 1999 study of conscience and complicity during the Holocaust. "The question was not one of knowledge," she affirms, ". . . those who wanted to know, could."[28] Rather, the question was one of "what significance they attached to the information." The responses of the majority of bystanders in Nazi Germany, she asserts, were "a form of denial . . . a form of denial that came to characterize bystanders everywhere: *the denial that it was possible to do anything to stop what was happening*."[29]

> At issue, then, is not just what people knew, but what they were prepared to know—the significance they attached to that knowledge ...
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> [T]he readiness to know is absent when there is no fundamental readiness to act. In other words, a basic ethical stance of "preparedness" is necessary for people to become engaged even on the level of simply acknowledging that something is happening . . .

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[26] W. Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's Final Solution* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown & Co, 1980), p. 7.
[27] J. Katz, "Was the Holocaust Predictable?" *Commentary* (May 1975), p. 42.
[28] V. J. Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (Westport, CT and London, Greenwood, 1999), p. 51.
[29] Ibid., p. 51.

> people whose fundamental stance toward the world around them is passive will tune out what they don't want to know.[30]

On this point, I believe Barnett is substantially correct. Rendering the unthinkable knowable typically requires the presence of a fundamental stance: "a preparedness to act." People who are not prepared to act typically will not be prepared to admit—either to themselves or to others—that evil is being done. Where the preparedness to act is not present, in other words, epistemic agency is compromised. In such cases, states of affairs that would otherwise be apprehended as the product of human choice are taken to be inevitable—states of affairs we are powerless to do anything about. And with that, each individual's sense of self-worth, which might otherwise come into question, is secured under a blanket of denial.

The question of what people *can* be expected to do thus takes on an additional aspect. The question is not a straightforward one of "*can* we see what we must." Rather, the real question is "Can we be *prepared* to see what we must."

Having identified "preparedness" as an important—though perhaps not sufficient—condition of "seeing" as Delbo implores us leads any further enquiry in a number of potentially challenging directions, none of which we will have space to adequately address here. Within the confines of this paper, therefore, let us return to the questions with which we departed, leaving behind one single observation before moving forward.

There is considerable research to suggest, as Jonathan Shay does, that the presence or absence of social support is a factor of no small importance. Certainly, while a preparedness to act in response to a given state of affairs can mean a number of different things, such a capacity is one in which the role of social support is commonly entailed. Philip Hallie comes to a similar conclusion in his landmark *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*.[31] Without the support of the larger community—and in particular, the community leadership—the remarkable efforts to save the Jews of La Chambron would not have been. Nonetheless, whether or not *communities* see themselves as capable of action—and thereby occupy what Barnett goes on to call the requisite "basic ethical stance"—would also appear to be, for us, a question that feeds back into the loop: "what do they see?" "what can they see?" "can they see what they must? (can they see the social support that may, in fact, be available?)

In any particular instance, answers to these questions appear to be conditioned by any number of factors, one of which is clearly (once again) social support, another of which could be individual volition on the part of members of the community in question. As John Kekes reminds us (I think rightly), some individuals are, or come to be, more reflective in their

[30] Ibid., p. 52.
[31] P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

decisions, more responsible in their actions, and demonstrate a willingness, propensity, or disposition to work *harder* throughout their lives than do others.[32] Georg Solmssen, for example, in arriving at the conclusions cited, may have done so in no small part because he had the kind of social support that allowed for the kind of acknowledgement in question. He may also have done so, however, for precisely the reason that he himself has given: in moral terms, because "it would be wrong not to face it squarely without any attempt at prettification."

3. Why Must We Be Made to See?

If there is to be a credible claim of "never again" (a claim made entirely too easily and too often, in my opinion), the answer to "can we be prepared to see?" will have to be a largely unqualified "yes." It is, after all, difficult to envision the Holocaust transpiring in a world exemplifying a pervasive basic ethical stance—one where human beings are, by and large, prepared to "see" as Delbo's imperative requires of us. Being markedly pessimistic that such preparation is possible on a sufficiently global scale, I will bypass "never again" as an answer. In addressing "why we must," I focus instead on some more tangible—though perhaps, no less important—particulars.

In the selection cited at the outset of this paper, Primo Levi tells of a recurrent dream that he had throughout the year he spent interned at Auschwitz. "My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word." This dream, he further recounts, was not only his dream but also "the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone . . . the pain of every day," he concludes, was "translated . . . constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story."[33]

Primo Levi's fateful dream, his lifelong struggle, and, in his later years, his escalating dismay at the tenuous and fallacious nature of memory, all speak to a common experience.[34] Much as they might wish it were otherwise, upon their liberation the survivors of Auschwitz were no longer in harmony with the consensus of the larger everyday world. As a consequence, by doing nothing more than simply existing as survivors of Auschwitz, they found themselves representative of a part of reality that, as Langer noted, "we are unprepared to accept." The most defining events of their lives had transpired "outside the realm of socially validated

[32] J. Kekes, *Facing Evil* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton, 1993), pp. 106-123.
[33] P. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 60.
[34] See e.g., P. Levi, "The Memory of the Offense" in *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1988), pp. 23-35.

reality."[35] That simple fact brings us into confrontation with an almost insurmountable divide. In the words of Leo Eitringer,

> on the one side [are] the victims, who perhaps wish to forget but cannot, and on the other all those with strong, often unconscious motives who very intensely both wish to forget [or as is more likely, remain ignorant] and succeed in doing so.[36]

The testimony that has come forth from the Holocaust is replete with efforts to bridge—or at least to articulate—this divide, an attempt that has left behind a record of an "unequal dialogue," or conflict, between fundamentally different horizons of experience.[37]

As Susan Brison has astutely pointed out in commenting on Levi's "unlistened-to story," the social invisibility entailed here can kill.

> "Why does it happen?" [Levi] asks. "Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?" (60). Why is it so horrifying for survivors to be unheard? There is a scene in the film *La Famiglia* (Ettore Scola, 1987) in which a little boy's uncle pretends not to see him, a game that quickly turns from a bit of fun into a kind of torture when the man persists long beyond the boy's tolerance for invisibility. For the child, not to be seen is not to exist, to be annihilated. Not to be heard means that the self that the survivor has become does not exist. Since the earlier self died, the surviving self needs to be known and acknowledged in order to exist.[38]

I believe Brison is fundamentally correct. The consequence of not being heard is a kind of death. Not to be heard means that, in some of the most important and defining respects of selfhood, the self does not, and cannot, exist.

In the end, I therefore submit, Charlotte Delbo's imperative has less to do with the Holocaust—the event upon which we have all, for the most part, been fixated—than it has to do with us. Delbo's imperative is not primarily a response to Auschwitz, enormous though that might be. Rather, it is primarily a response to what came *after*—to the retrospective silence, and to the apparently smaller, certainly much quieter (perhaps barely audible), everyday affliction which confronted the survivors. The imperative is not to overturn history, such that

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[35] J. L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic, 1992), p. 8.
[36] L. Eitringer, "The Concentration Camp Syndrome and Its Late Sequelae," in *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators: Essays on the Nazi Holocaust*, ed. J. E. Dimdale (New York: Hemisphere, 1980), p. 159.
[37] Ibid., p. 159.
[38] S. J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton, 2002), p. 62.

it will never again occur. Rather, it is to overturn the consensus of an everyday world that everyday *continues* to occur. The Holocaust happened. For the lives of those who endured it, it cannot be undone. But here, as elsewhere, "it is the community which provides, or fails to provide, support for the victim . . . and it is to the community that victims must return."[39]

At issue is not what happened, but rather what continued to happen, to them.[40]

4. Conclusion

Il faut donner à voir. They must be made to see. The image that "the mirror of the Holocaust reflects back at us," Langer wrote, is an "image of a self stripped of its moral and physical power . . . so unflattering, so terrifying in its naked helplessness, that [few have had] the courage to stare into the abyss and record without flinching what they saw there."[41] Charlotte Delbo was one of those few, and what she saw from the standpoint she occupied—both in Auschwitz and after—should concern us all.

If there is to be adequate comprehension of—to say nothing of justice for—the survivors of evil, the moral and epistemic gap between survivors and bystanders must be overcome.[42] The unfortunate reality is that human beings are vulnerable creatures—physically, epistemically, and morally—living in a world which they are, by and large, unprepared to confront, much less accept. In this world things like the Holocaust can and do happen, over and over again, in ways large and small. These simple facts underwrite a truly staggering

[39] J. Williams; K. Holmes, *The Second Assault: Rape and Public Attitudes* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood, 1981), p. 18.

[40] This claim gives rise to an important question seldom explored in the literature thus far: To what extent is the suffering and impoverishment that victims characteristically endure a direct result of the traumatic events themselves, and to what extent are they the result of real failures on the part of the community as a whole to share in, and thereby substantially mitigate, what is an otherwise overwhelming burden? Put another way, in the aftermath—insofar as real acknowledgment, communalization, and concerted effort to rectify the situation are absent—to what extent are the pervasive anger and mistrust [what Jean Améry once unapologetically called "resentment"] that often characterize the victim's response to those around them both justified and proportionally appropriate? See J. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. S. Rosenfeld; S. P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana, 1980), pp. 62-81.

[41] L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York and Oxford: Oxford, 1995), p. 8.

[42] Jennifer Geddes is optimistic this can be done: "By acknowledging the limitations to our knowledge of suffering due to the fact that we are outsiders, by recognizing our temptations to "redeem" suffering—to try to find some good that can come out of it—and by listening to those who have suffered evil in a way that reshapes our preconceptions, we can begin to "see" in the ways Delbo strove to make us see" [J. L. Geddes, "Banal Evil and Useless Knowledge: Hannah Arendt and Charlotte Delbo on Evil after the Holocaust." *Hypatia* 18/1 (2003), p. 113.]. As I have tried to show, consciousness of evil is a more tenuous enterprise than Geddes appears to allow.

capacity for betrayal—a capacity that human beings are also, by and large, unprepared to confront.

Unthinkable does not equal unknowable, however. That which we cannot know is not that which we would not know, or even that about which we have the greatest difficulty knowing. What Delbo's imperative demands can be done. Some individuals and some communities have done it, no matter how many individuals and communities have not. Beyond this modest fact, however, lies a deeper question: Can every individual and every community do it? Can human beings—taken as a whole, taken as what Aristotle rightly saw as interdependent political animals—can human beings *per se* be prepared to see what we must? As I hope to have shown, there are powerful reasons to think the answer is "no." *

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