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Beyond Systems: Responsibility as Ethical Exposure in a Fragmented World: From Political Obedience to Ethical Awakening

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Universiteit Leiden

Beyond Systems: Responsibility as Ethical Exposure in a Fragmented World

From Political Obedience to Ethical Awakening

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Philosophy (MA) (60ECTS): Modern European Philosophy

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Introduction

What is responsibility? What does it mean to be a morally responsible subject? These are questions at the heart of my thesis. I do not ask what it means to be morally responsible in a purely theoretical or abstract sense, but rather I start from the historical and existential situation in which we find ourselves today, namely an era marked by the erosion of a shared ethical foundation and the normalization of systemic injustice. We have finally found ourselves facing circumstances in which a greater inability to respond has become strikingly evident, both politically and within everyday life. We find ourselves living in a context in which violence is often mediated, distanced, and abstract. Language is perpetually manipulated, and power blurs the line between legal obligation and moral abandonment. In this situation, responsibility risks being reduced to an empty word, distant from the lived experience of responding to others.

I feel the need to reflect on this issue because of the growing gap between legality and justice, between functioning systems and meaningful human actions. How can individuals preserve their capacity for action and judgment when they find themselves within systems that suppress critical thinking? How can we be responsible if our participation in injustice is hardly visible, and our actions are mediated by algorithms and bureaucracies? The urgency of this question grows ever more in the face of the various crises we are experiencing, be they humanitarian, ecological or social. It is increasingly evident that we can no longer rely exclusively on political mechanisms, because they often collapse morally. What becomes increasingly clear in these situations is the fragility of the human being as such and the need not to reduce responsibility to rules or systemic strategies. My thesis does not arise from the desire to provide a definitive answer, but I feel the need to remain anchored to the question. It begins with the refusal to allow responsibility to be managed by structures or deferred to abstract systems of justification. Thus understood, responsibility is addressed in an existential way because it manifests itself when no one is looking, we respond even if there are no rules, and we are called to take care of others even when we have no valid reason to do so. My concern is not purely academic but emerges from a deep unease whereby something essential to moral life is put aside. It happens too often that responsibility is confused with obedience and ethics is compared to legality, creating a dangerous gap between individual conscience and collective structures. I feel as if there is a sort of exhaustion of the language of duty and a silent, but at the same time pervasive, resignation in the face of injustice, almost as if it were normal that no one really reacts, and that conformism turns into a sort of second human nature. What guides my reflection is not the search for a better ethical theory, but the need to preserve what makes us human in a historical period in which morality seems impossible or easily claimed. What

strikes me most is that the most devastating forms of violence, both past and present, are not committed by monstrous beings, but come from ordinary people who have simply stopped asking themselves what they are doing and above all have stopped reacting. It is for this reason that I argue that responsibility does not refer to good will but is mostly about presence. Moral life is not based exclusively on freedom, but is based on exposure, on staying with what disturbs and questions us.

My aim is to show that responsibility goes beyond politics, but it must also know when and how to return to it. In its deepest sense, ethical responsibility grounds political action, but it must never be confused with it. Ethics and politics must remain in tension, constantly reminding each other of their limits and excesses. In this work I will explore how responsibility is not a possession or an assigned role, but something that claims us, binds us, and often precedes our choices. I will argue that responsibility cannot be fully understood if we start from systems or from the self; it is only when we begin from the relationship, from the encounter with the other, that a sense of urgent and profound responsibility arises. Through a philosophical and existential inquiry, I will compare weighers and ethical traditions to inhabit the question and remain morally awake in a world that often puts us to sleep. Mine is an invitation to better understand what it means to respond, especially when no system demands it and when no certainty is offered.

This thesis will be divided into three main chapters, each of which will attempt a distinct but interconnected approach to the question of responsibility. The first chapter will explore responsibility as a political problem and focuses on the conditions in which modern societies shape, limit, and often nullify the possibility of moral responsibility. I will begin by analyzing the crisis and contradictions that have arisen from the collapse of the Enlightenment project, and in doing so I will draw on the work of Edmund Husserl, Hannah Arendt, and Zygmunt Bauman. Their thought reveals how the ideal of an autonomous reason of modernity has fallen into a form of instrumental rationality that has emptied responsibility of its depth. My analysis will then move to Arendt's theory of how the instrumentalization of reason has led to the development of totalitarian systems that exploit this void and transform individuals into mere functionaries, and moral reflection is suppressed through bureaucracy, ideology and fear. In this context, the concept of responsibility is absorbed by legalistic logic or even disappears. In response, I will present Jan Patočka's notion of "care of the soul", but not as a refuge of the inner life, but rather as a form of ethical resistance to the nullification of systemic morality.[1] Patočka calls for an existential dimension of responsibility where one refuses to passively conform to the normalization of politics and instead tries to remain consciously ethical, even under suffocating conditions.

[1] M.Cajthaml, G. Girgenti, *Platone e l'Europa*, G. Reale (cur.), Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1997, p. 66.

In the second chapter I will shift the focus from political critique to an investigation of responsibility more as an ethical event, which precedes us and transcends institutional and legal frameworks. Through the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas, I will analyze how responsibility does not derive from rules or roles but arises from exposure to the Other. In this framework, responsibility is not something that we choose, but it is something that interrupts us. It is asymmetric, not instrumental and it is not reciprocal. What Lévinas describes is an ethical subjectivity that is based on vulnerability, attention and passivity. In this perspective, responsibility is fragile, silent and often difficult to grasp, but it is what constitutes the very foundation of ethical life.

The third chapter will establish a dialogue on what has been discussed in the previous sections by comparing Lévinas and Patočka, particularly on the theme of "care of the soul". Although both philosophers refuse to reduce ethics to systems and contest the dehumanization of modern structures, their approaches diverge. I will argue that although Patočka's conception of responsibility is existentially rich, it is still not sufficient to capture the radical demand of the other that Lévinas exposes in his ethics. Patočka insists on interior authenticity and historical responsibility, while Lévinas proposes an ethics where the initiative of the self is transcended by an encounter. Lévinas, therefore, radicalizes what Patočka begins and shows how responsibility is not based on introspection or history, but on the face of the other who calls me even before I can respond. This chapter does not simply reconcile the two visions but highlights their tension to clarify what ethical responsibility means today: the possibility of being morally responsible in a context that tempts us to retreat, justify ourselves, or forget.

Through this analysis, I will try to demonstrate that responsibility goes beyond politics, but it must also know when and how to return to it. I think that ethical responsibility, in its deepest sense, grounds political action, but it cannot be reduced to it. When ethics and politics are in tension, they remind each other of their respective limits, distortions and points of no arrival.

1 Responsibility and Politics in the 21st Century

What does it mean to be morally responsible? And what does it mean to be morally responsible in a world governed by systems? These two questions are the focus of this chapter. Nowadays, ethical life seems to be increasingly absorbed in procedural and legal frameworks: to be considered "good" you must be able to abide by rules, comply with roles and institutional expectations. The word responsibility, however, comes from the Latin *respondeo*, which means to respond. It is not a question here of responding to the law, but rather of responding to a call from beyond us: it is a response to the Other, to truth and to the world. From my perspective, modern society has undergone a profound transformation on how it understands and exercises responsibility. I argue that this stems first and foremost from the failure of the Enlightenment project: the Enlightenment extolled promises about how reason and law would ensure freedom and justice, but it was a promise it failed to deliver at all. Instead of developing an autonomous moral judgment, modernity has instead given rise to a system in which conscience is expressed through bureaucracy, and ethical life placed in the hands of legality. What happens if responsibility becomes something automatic, procedural and impersonal? What is to be lost?

As a first step toward this diagnosis, I will examine the collapse of the Enlightenment project by drawing on the thought of Husserl, Arendt and Bauman. I will explore how this collapse has opened the door to totalitarian forms of government, in which ideology has replaced judgment and legality has become an instrument of atrocity. I will then make an analysis of Totalitarianism and ideology through the lens of Arendt's philosophical politics. Finally, I will explore Patočka's notion of soul care, which offers a vital reference point to the moral and political crises of modernity, offering profound insight to the legal flattening of moral life.

If morality has been replaced by morality in the 21st century, this shift then requires a return to the question of soul, interiority and responsibility as something that cannot be delegated to systems, no matter how efficient or progressive they claim to be.

1.1 The Failure of the Enlightenment and the Detachment from Experience

The pivotal moment, or rather the rupture, that helps us understand what has changed in the 21st century in the idea of moral responsibility is the failure that stems from the Enlightenment project. This failure is not merely a historical variation or a consequence of unfulfilled revolutions, but it is a philosophical failure that has deeper roots, in which hope was placed in the very assumptions of the Enlightenment, such as reason, progress and the human subject. At that time, the moral and political future of humanity had been entrusted to the universality of reason and the formal procedures of legality. The resulting trust and support played a key role in destroying the conditions for which ethical responsibility is possible.

To best describe this analysis, the figure of Edmund Husserl is relevant to help us better understand what has happened. In *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, the philosopher philosophically explores what are the consequences of the Enlightenment. In his critique, Husserl does not reject science and rationality per se, but mostly seeks to understand how European science, although born out of a philosophical impulse toward truth and meaning, then became estranged from the world and lived experience. According to him, there is a real "crisis of meaning" in modern rationality whereby knowledge becomes detached from the Lebenswelt, that is, the world as it is lived and experienced by historical subjects. He further argues that the sciences we have become "methodologically blind to the world of meaning of subjectivity," and thus to the very world in which different ethical and existential situations come into being.[2]

The detachment that results from failure is not only epistemological but is primarily existential. Rationality has begun to dehumanize itself because it has formalized into systems of knowledge that are no longer capable of recognizing their foundation in the subjective and moral world. The Enlightenment ideal of objectivity was intended to enhance moral autonomy, but instead ended up crumbling it, separating thought from responsibility. In doing so, one loses both the possibility of better understanding the world and the ability to respond to it: to be touched, challenged, challenged by others. Husserl's critique helps to show how responsibility is not sustained only by rules or systems but is instead something broader that requires a relation that is grounded in the experience of ethical nature, a relation that is therefore vulnerable and responsive.

I argue that this detachment has critical implications. Moral responsibility at its root has the capacity to be responsive to others in their singularity; therefore, this also means that any worldview that distracts from singularity undermines the very condition of ethical life. In modernity, there is a tendency to reduce ethics to legality and to equate responsibility with compliance: this tendency stems directly from the formalization of reason by the Enlightenment. Husserl points out how philosophical depth has been lost in this transition, and especially how the form of thought that makes moral judgment possible, the form that is inherent in experience and in the world that we share with others, is missing.[3]

1.2 The Loss of Responsibility in a Rationalized World

To fully understand the moral transformations that have taken place in the 21st century, that is, the continued replacement of conscience by compliance, Hannah Arendt's contribution is crucial,

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[2] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology : An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 6–53.
[3] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology : An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 3-59.

as her critique toward modernity is revealing of the deeper ethical failure that stems from the Enlightenment. Arendt, in addition to discussing Totalitarianism, provides a philosophical vocabulary that helps me develop an essential issue in this chapter: moral responsibility has been replaced by obedience to laws and bureaucracy, and this shift stems from the rationalism that was supposed to emancipate us. Arendt never completely rejected Enlightenment reason, but she presses the fact that it is incapable of sustaining on its own a moral and political life suited to human dignity. In *The Human Condition* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the philosopher examines how Enlightenment rationality is focused on control, prediction and systematization, and how it has culminated in a depoliticized world where authentic judgment is replaced by technocratic conformity. In doing so, responsibility is no longer a necessary condition for relationship and morality but becomes merely a necessary function of compliance. In this way, a person is "good" to the extent that he or she conforms.[4][5]

Arendt's insight directly references and extends Husserl's critique of the Enlightenment in *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, in which he identified a rupture between the rationality of science and the Lebenswelt, the world of life.[6] Arendt was a student of Husserl, and in fact inherited from him, in addition to method, a concern: the moment thought becomes detached from experience, from concrete human life, it loses its grounding in reality. Husserl remains focused more on epistemology and the loss of meaning, while Arendt grounds this concern in the ethical and political realm. She mainly questions what happens to moral responsibility in a world where thought is emptied of context and action is governed by the system.

This doubt is clearly examined in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where the notion of the "banality of evil" is introduced.[7] This terrifying insight of Arendt is that evil is not something necessarily monstrous but is something that can be committed by ordinary individuals who have been deprived of their ability and will to think, become mere cogs in a legal and bureaucratic machine. Adolf Eichmann, one of the main perpetrators of the deportation of Jews in Europe during the Holocaust, simply followed the rules and followed the procedures. We can say, therefore, that from the Enlightenment point of view he was rational. However, it was precisely his rationality, a rationality devoid of conscience, reflection and inwardness, that allowed the atrocity he committed. This – the exposure of how rationality can become ethically hollow and allow atrocity through mere obedience

[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1958), 135–47.
[5] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY, Cleveland and New York, 1962), 460–79.
[6] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology : An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 105–110; 139–145.
[7] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem : A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2022), 135–50.

– is where Arendt is indispensable to my analysis: if responsibility – as I understand it – means responding to the Other, then it must presuppose an I capable of judging, of stopping, of questioning, even when systems say otherwise. Arendt shows how it is Enlightenment rationalism, completely untethered from this thought, that fails to receive evil and even makes it trivial.[8]

The link with Husserl is thus also shown by the fact that both philosophers deal with a form of abstraction that forgets the subject. Arendt, however, instead of interpreting this transformation philosophically, turns it more into a political and moral issue: she analyses the change that takes place in individuals when they cease to be thinking, judging and acting subjects, becoming merely functional to an impersonal system. In this way, it helps in framing my broader argument: moral responsibility must resist systematization and cannot be delegated, externalized and legalized. It begins with the ability to say no, to interrupt and, therefore, to respond.

In this context, Arendt is relevant because she not only elaborates a critique on Enlightenment reason, but also provides a path back to what it means to act morally in the world. She insists on plurality and naturalness, elements that remind us that responsibility can never be something abstract, but is always a matter of who, not just what.[9]

1.3 The Modern Organisation of Responsibility

Zygmunt Bauman pushes Arendt's critique of the depoliticising effects of Enlightenment rationality further and examines how these same rational structures lead to a collapse of moral responsibility in modern social life. Arendt has contributed in this chapter to highlight how the Enlightenment reduced thinking to the observance of rules, while Bauman contributes to show how this degeneration stems from the very institutions and everyday practices of modernity. His contribution is relevant in clarifying a crucial part of my argument: the failure of the Enlightenment project is not reducible to a philosophical error but represents a transformation of the world in which responsibility is organised and shifted from individuals to impersonal systems. Bauman's thought is no different from Arendt's in that it develops from his insights. Arendt explained how evil can manifest itself in the form of administrative obedience, and Bauman analyses the institutional logic that constitutes such obedience by making it desirable and virtuous.[10] In this way, his analysis provides the sociological basis for Arendt's philosophical insight. In fact, both reveal that Enlightenment rationality, instead of promoting autonomy and ethical clarity, has instead increasingly given rise to a culture absent of morality.

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[8] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem : A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2022), 135–50.
[9] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1958), 135–47.
[10] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem : A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2022), 135–50.

In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman argues that the Holocaust did not stem from individuals who predated the barbaric times but emphasises that it was the result of modern rational logic. Like Arendt, in fact, he argues that the atrocities committed were not only carried out by individuals who can be described as fanatics, but also involved ordinary people who followed procedures.[11] Bauman also extends this concept and examines how it is bureaucracy that systematically eliminates the space for ethical reflection: responsibility is exercised as if it were part of a system of division of labour, morality is procedural, people are no longer able to ask themselves what is right and what is wrong, rather they ask themselves what is permitted or expected.[12] Bauman is relevant to this analysis of mine because he helps to understand the very structure of responsibility in modernity, not just its failures at certain moments.

I would like to emphasise a change that takes place with Bauman: in Arendt, the problem is more about the disappearance of thought, or in Husserl it focuses more on the loss of fundamental meaning, whereas in Bauman I find the problem focuses on the redefinition of moral action itself. In the modern system, morality is not a concept whereby relational or existential responsibility is acted upon but is replaced by the performance of a role. This represents Husserl's warning that scientific rationality alienates us from the real-life world, and just as science abstracts the world, institutions abstract moral life.[13] Bauman develops the concept of liquid society, a modernity where Enlightenment rationality continues to shape subjectivity even in its apparent dissolution. Liquid society is characterised by uncertainty, mobility and the decline of stable institutions. In this context, the disappearance of fixed moral norms does not represent a greater freedom, but a real crisis of ethical orientation.[14] Individuals are deprived of the necessary structures that make their choices meaningful and are instead fluctuating and not anchored to these structures. The Enlightenment thus fails in two stages: in the first, ethical judgement is destroyed by the rigidity of proceduralism; in the second, fluidity erodes the possibility of shared norms.

Despite this criticism, Bauman does not propose a return to pre-modernity values as a solution. Instead, he suggests the need for a type of thinking based on moral responsibility, proximity and relationships. Referring to Levinas, Bauman advocates an ethics of encounter composed of morality that cannot be reduced to systems.[15] This resonates strongly with Husserl's

[11] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 1–30.
[12] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 89-121.

[13] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology : An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 48-54.
[14] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 91–127.
[15] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 120-123.

solution of a complete life and Arendt's idea of plurality. In a sense, all three move us away from abstraction and towards relational responsibility.

In referring to Bauman, I wanted to highlight how the failure of the Enlightenment is not a thing of the past, but is a structure we are still in. The procedure of its moral systems and the prevalence of reason over bureaucracy still define our institutions and our hesitation in approaching ethical life. Accountability today has been made structurally unlikely, which is precisely why I find it particularly important that there is a need to rethink morality not as a system, but as a relationship.

1.4 Why the Enlightenment Failure Still Matters

What the thoughts of the philosophers just mentioned have in common is concern about the collapse of moral responsibility under the weight of procedural rationality. The Enlightenment, seeking to liberate humanity through knowledge and universal laws, underestimated and eliminated the importance of the need for subjective moral commitment, as well as the inner dialogue with the self that enables ethical action. If morality is attributed to systems and laws go in place of conscience, the possibility of ethical living is lost. Consequently, I find that the failure of the Enlightenment is not only a historical fact, but remains a burning issue that continues to shape the moral and political context in which we live. The legacy of this failure portrays a central concern for any critical inquiry into ethics and politics in the 21st century, as we still live in a world where legality often trumps morality and responsibility is often taken over by bureaucracy. Understanding failure is essential to rethinking responsibility not as obedience to external structures, but as a personal and rational commitment that is grounded in ethical imagination and openness to the other.

1.5 Moral Responsibility After the Enlightenment

So far, I have explored the structural failure of the Enlightenment, and how its goal of using reason as an instrument of emancipation ultimately turned out to be an instrument of control. This critique brings us to the next step in my analysis: one of the most significant consequences of the failure of the Enlightenment project is the replacement of ideology with moral responsibility. As a historical thinker of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt is crucial for me to be able to recount this condition. What gives me most pause is the following question: what happens to moral responsibility when rational systems exceed human judgement?

The Enlightenment created the conditions that made the development of ideology possible: although reason theoretically had the task of liberation, at the same time it also had to organise, predict and systematise human life. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt describes ideology, and does not do so by limiting it to being merely a collection of ideas, but depicts it more as a

closed logical system that claims to reveal the necessary laws of history.[16] In this sense, we can say that ideology reflects the dark side of Enlightenment rationality, as it promises a logical coherence that should be moral, but in reality is only eliminating the unpredictability, plurality and necessity of judgement. In my opinion, the failure of the Enlightenment lies not in its intentions, but in its unintended consequences. The aim was to emancipate individuals through universal reason; instead, it only made them dispensable to the system. This is because responsibility is absorbed by systems and is no longer something that belongs personally to the individual, becoming a mere procedural function. In this context, Arendt's analysis of Totalitarianism represents a strong philosophical critique of the Enlightenment itself. What makes it even more shocking is that atrocities are not committed out of hatred or fanaticism, but in the name of rationality, to follow an idea that seems to be logically valid. This is not just a historical analysis; it is rather an attempt to answer the questions that are at the heart of this chapter: What does it mean to be morally responsible in a world run by systems? What happens when responsibility is no longer part of personal judgement, but is rooted in the internal logic of institutions, ideologies or technologies? And what is lost when the moral thinking of individuals is replaced by the observance of rules?

What concerns me most is that ideology provides the individual with moral certainty, and thus removes his capacity for thought. The burden of judgement is lifted by psychological relief, and action is aligned to a system. Ideology, then, is a distorted continuation of Enlightenment rationality. I share with Arendt how for her the danger lies not in fanaticism or a feeling of hatred, but how it is inherent in thoughtlessness: if one stops asking whether something is right or wrong, and only follows a certain logic, responsibility inevitably collapses from within.[17] To this day, ideology may manifest itself in such a way that it may not look like Totalitarianism, but it is very much the same because moral responsibility is always something automatic, impersonal and following procedures. And it is precisely this form of responsibility that I want to discuss in the Enlightenment, moral agents are cogs in a system, and it is ideology that gives them a motive that makes them seem virtuous for their function.

The dimension of responsibility that I would like to recover is one where it cannot be externalised to systems, but responsibility that begins where systems end: where the encounter with the other takes place, where actions are unpredictable, and judgement is not relegated to bureaucracy.

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[16] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY, Cleveland and New York, 1962), 468-470.

[17] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem : A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2022), 135–137, 288.

1.6 Radical Evil: Thoughtlessness and the Annihilation of Judgment

As we have just seen, ideology is a fundamental component of totalitarian systems, and another element that I would now like to analyse in my investigation is the moral transformation that ideology entails. To do this, I refer to what Arendt refers to as the inversion of values: this is a process in which categories such as good and evil are not only distorted and manipulated, but are stripped of their relational meaning and given an ideological function.[18] The problem here is that what is wrong is defined as right, but not only that, one can no longer identify a difference between the two. This is why a collapse of responsibility takes place, because within the totalitarian regime one no longer acts towards someone, but acts according to a rule, a role and a programme that will always be justified and legalised by the problem.

I argue that this upheaval does not stem from a simple historical curiosity related to totalitarian regimes - Nazism and Stalinism - but is an indication of a greater failure of the Enlightenment. Through Arendt, we can see how Enlightenment promises about how reason would lead to progress, moral clarity and autonomy, instead turned out to be the opposite and detached reason from lived experience, which in fact then produced a logic that erased the freedom, judgement and conscience of individuals. Ideology is thus the true fulfilment of Enlightenment rationality, even if apparently unintended, which was accomplished through the complete denial of pluralism, rather than its celebration. It has resulted in a system that replaces the fragile and difficult space of moral doubt and shared reality, and instead offers certainty, where contradiction becomes not only inconvenient but also dangerous.

From this point on, Arendt's notion of radical evil becomes a relevant element of the chapter.[19] This is because it is not the typical traditional accounts of evil in which there are feelings such as cruelty, passion or transgression that are intentional. Radical evil is trivial, not because it is harmless, on the contrary, but because it is devoid of inwardness: the people who commit it no longer feel like agents. It is for this reason that it even appears as disturbing, because it is no longer a kind of monstrous exception, but becomes a real ordinary function. In fact, Arendt writes that it is committed by those who "refuse to think" and those who simply play a role within a defined system that has already predetermined good and evil.[20] In this context, responsibility cannot be an internal confrontation between the self and the other but is limited to being a procedural obedience. What

[18] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY, Cleveland and New York, 1962), 460–475.

[19] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY, Cleveland and New York, 1962), 459.

[20] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem : A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2022), 135.

amazes me most about Radical Evil is how it highlights how to ethically destroy does not always require hatred and sadism, but for certain situations only the absence of imagination, the inability to see the other as an equal human being, or the inability to see one's own actions from different perspectives. This is why I argue that Arendt's critique is something that goes beyond a description of totalitarianism, but instead raises a stable philosophical problem: does responsibility exist without judgement? Can we define an action as moral if thought has been replaced by function? Through radical evil we can see how life, when governed by the system, creates a situation whereby no one is responsible because everyone follows orders. However, we should not think that this moral world belongs only to totalitarian regimes, because it is typical of any system, be it bureaucratic or ideological, in which logical action becomes automated and detached from human life. Talking about the failure of the Enlightenment project is important because when emancipation is promised, one must consider the risk that this, under certain conditions, depersonalises the world and legalises violence. Freedom and plurality should not be underestimated and seen merely as political values but are necessary conditions for moral responsibility. Following the rules does not mean being responsible, but to be responsible one must be able to break them and be able to judge from within. We must refuse to be just a tool for the system. We must not only understand the past, because reflecting on radical evil also means asking ourselves what must be cultivated, defended and preserved today so that responsibility is still possible. The ethical annihilation that results from ideology and radical evil is not something that emerges from nowhere, but has much deeper roots: a condition of vulnerability already exists beforehand that the totalitarian system takes advantage of, and it is that of an already fractured society, where the relational fabric is absent.[21] In this sense, we can say that totalitarianism is therefore not imposed from above, but derives from a previous human collapse. In fact, Arendt's analysis of loneliness helps to better reflect on the conditions under which moral responsibility is endangered today.

Being alone is not the same as loneliness, they are two different conditions. Arendt explains that it is not a matter of being alone with one's thoughts, but it is a condition whereby one is detached from all forms of mutual recognition and speech, it is a disconnection from the shared space where meaning is born. If individuals no longer feel part of a shared world, then their capacity for judgement and action diminishes. This is how ideology penetrates people's lives, because besides being persuasive, it is also comforting: at a time of moral disorientation, consistency becomes attractive. Ideology, however, does not offer the truth, but deludes people with a completeness that does not exist, shutting them off from meaning and replacing it with a world

[21] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY, Cleveland and New York, 1962), 475–479.

made up of a system of certainties. It is for this reason that I argue that loneliness is not a subject that should be underestimated, because it is not just a sociological observation, but mostly an ethical concern. We can see this from the fact that moral responsibility does not begin with an abstract principle but does so through the experience of being-with-others. The moment this bond is broken, the other disappears, and thus responsibility can no longer be assumed. Here again we can observe how we witness a reversal of values: the presence of another human being, which is the basis of ethics, disappears in favour of the logic of the system.

For Arendt, the medium through which this dehumanisation takes place is language. That of totalitarian regimes is a language that conceals, that uses euphemisms such as "final solution" or "liquidation" to disguise violence and make it more accessible.[22] What strikes me most about this transformation, besides the brutality, is how it is possible to normalise evil on a cognitive and linguistic level. As words lose their ability to reveal reality, judgement also loses its meaning. This collapse of meaning represents a true moral collapse, where actions are no longer evaluated according to the impact they have on human lives but take on meaning according to the role they play within the ideological and bureaucratic chain. This process makes responsibility procedural, where orders are followed, rules are obeyed, and roles are played without asking what one is doing to someone else. Again, this reflects the logic of radical evil: it is not cruelty, rather it is the inability or refusal to judge, replacing thought with function.

I have devoted space to the phenomena of loneliness, distorted language and ethical nihilism because they are important in showing the ground on which responsibility is either cultivated or annihilated. In the totalitarian regime, the system does not only produce evil through coercion, but also creates the necessary conditions for responsibility to become unimaginable. It is precisely this that we must resist, the normalisation of conditions that eliminate the space where responsibility exists. In fact, Arendt does not aspire to a return of moral absolutes, but wants to defend a fragile political space in which freedom, speech and plurality are possible.[23] from my point of view, this space is not only political, it is also ontological; it is a space where we appear for what we are, that is, as human beings, and where we are allowed to act and be judged. If this space is destroyed, the possibility of acting is also destroyed with it, and we stop functioning. To stop functioning means to stop thinking. To be responsible means to be able to appear before others, to speak, to judge, to be contradicted. Systems cannot do the moral work for us. Arendt reminds us how moral responsibility

[22] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY, Cleveland and New York, 1962), 430–432. See also Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem : A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2022), 87–88.
[23] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1958), 176–180.

is relational, it is sustained by the presence of others, by fragility and exposure. Being fragile does not mean being weak, because fragility is the very condition of ethics.

1.7 The Care of the Soul

After all that has been examined - the collapse of the Enlightenment project, the dehumanisation of ideology, the reduction of individuals to functions - one question remains open and truly difficult: how can one continue to live responsibly? What remains of individuals if their word is corrupted, if they no longer have a plurality that unites them, if truth is no more than a certainty and responsibility is replaced by obedience? I think this question is not merely rhetorical, but mostly an existential question. It stems from the need to ask what it means to act - to respond - when individuals surrender their capacity for judgement in exchange for comfort, conformity or survival.

It is here that I choose to address the subject of soul care, not as a metaphysical doctrine or spiritual exercise, but as a means of exalting something that is of particular concern to me: the refusal to forget what makes a human being truly human. I draw on Jan Patočka's reflections nota s an authority but as philosophical guide. I analyse it in such a way that it helps me to better articulate my insights, namely that the most radical act in the face of totalisation is to remain open: to continue to ask and listen, to continue to be fragile in the face of Others, and not to cease being exposed to the uncertainty of truth.

I understand soul-care as a form of responsibility that is not commanded but begins with attention and emerges when we allow ourselves to be touched by the world, with its injustice and suffering. I think caring for the soul means resisting the closure that comes with ideology and rejecting the temptation to let someone else act for us so that we can stop asking ourselves what is right and wrong. It is a painful and slow process in which one is morally awake, even where there are no certainties, and nothing seems to be clear. It is essential for the care of the soul that individuals are willing to be shaken. This is what Patočka calls *erschütterung*, that shaking of the self that occurs in moments of crisis, when we are confronted with uncomfortable situations such as death, guilt and history. However, it must not be something we do because a philosopher says so. We must do it because it is something I recognize in myself: in the silences of those who have suffered, in the inability of language to express what violence has done, in the silent request to say something anyway. I believe that responsibility, in fact, does not derive from a rule, but is born from a wound.[24]

[24] Jan Patocka, *La Cura Dell'anima* (Orthotes Editrice, 2019), 95-110.

This is where I want my voice to be, in a place of difficulty. The care of the soul is the name of this difficulty. It is a form of life that lives within contradictions, not that seeks to resolve them. Resisting turning into an instrument, listening even when listening is painful, refusing to reduce the self to something that does not belong to it and that makes it superficial. Totalitarianism seeks to eliminate the space of mystery that exists between the self and the Other, it offers fixed moral orders, total explanations and clarity, without having any kind of ambiguity within it. It builds a reality in which thinking is of no use to people, everything has already been decided. We can say that in this sense responsibility dies with certainty, not with violence. The care of the soul is not only opposed to power, but to closure. This opposition represents a form of resistance.

This also explains why I am attracted to Patočka's notion of sacrifice.[25] It is not a sacrifice imposed from above, but it is a sacrifice that comes from a greater commitment, that goes beyond us, it is a sacrifice that does not go towards an idea, but towards a relationship. It goes towards the Other. It is the sacrifice that is made when one chooses to remain human. This is what I want to insist on, that is, the fact that the care of the soul is not a retreat but is a relationship. It is not resignation at all, it is a decision that is taken several times and where one chooses to be responsible even if one is not certain, where one responds even if one does not yet know how. Since Totalitarianism can destroy the space in which responsibility can appear, then in a broader and more radical sense, the care of the soul can be precisely that element capable of making that space possible again. For this to happen, it must happen through presence, the telling of the truth, vulnerability, and in doing so it must be silent, even invisible if it wants to. The recovery of this space is indispensable to be able to give new life to the lost responsibility. It is also important to understand that to be responsible one cannot be alone: we are responsible in the presence of other individuals, and with them we share the disturbance of what we have felt, seen or lost. Responsibility is in fact shared because it arises from awareness, from the mutual recognition of one's own fragility, that same awareness that then exposes us and leads us to act.

Finally, I think that caring for the soul does not give us all the answers, but at the same time I believe that it provides us with a place to stay. I do not know if this can be enough or not, but after everything that has been destroyed by Totalitarianism – meaning, plurality, language, the person – it is important to find stable ground where ethical life can be refunded. This openness translates into the responsibility to respond and the courage to remain exposed where there is uncertainty.
This is why I chose to deal with the theme of caring for the soul, because it helps me understand that even when responsibility is broken it should not be understood as lost. She always waits for us,

[25] Jan Patocka, *La Cura Dell'anima* (Orthotes Editrice, 2019), 145-153.

even if in silence, and she is confident of our refusal and of the freedom that we choose to continually affirm.

1.8 Final Thoughts

What does it mean to be morally responsible? And what does it mean to be morally responsible in a world governed by systems? These are the questions I started from to begin my analysis. I did not arrive at a real conclusion, but I mostly carried out a deeper comparison between the conditions that make responsibility urgent and fragile within the modern world.

I followed how the Enlightenment project failed because it promised rational autonomy and instead only made room for forms of bureaucratic and systemic thought that completely emptied moral life of its ambiguity and depth. Through Husserl, Arendt and Bauman, I analyzed how faith in scientific rationality created a context in which responsibility is delegated, abstracted and completely lost. Subsequently, through Arendt's thought on the totalitarian regime, I further structured this diagnosis according to which in the system in which ideology dominates, responsibility not only disappears but becomes incomprehensible. Despite this, I wanted to demonstrate how the loss of responsibility in modernity does not represent a point of arrival. Referring to Patočka's concept of care for the soul, I reflected on what could sustain this collapse without going back but referring to a new form of responsibility that arises from attention, vulnerability and refusal. In this way, responsibility is no longer relegated to a system that requires compliance with rules and the performance of roles but derives from a response that responds to a shared experience of life, with its vulnerability and suffering. In doing so, I have tried to answer the question of responsibility from a more political point of view, in the sense that human plurality, judgment and moral exercise are possible. In this way, responsibility is not imposed from above but is something that arises from the encounter between the self and the world.

But this is not where I want to stop. In this chapter I have shown how responsibility can resist being reduced to being a system, but in the next one I would like to explore it from another point of view: what if responsibility were not only part of a political act, but went beyond and was an ethical relationship that preceded politics? What if it were something that did not begin with judgment but with the Other? This is what I want to explore in the next chapter: referring to the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas, I want to think of responsibility not as a choice, but as a calling. What I will do is ask myself if responsibility is not only a matter of care as we have just seen, but as an infinite obligation.

2 The Ethical Dimension of Responsibility

In the previous chapter I explored how the legacy of the Enlightenment has shaped modern understandings of responsibility, often reducing it to legal, procedural, or ideological terms. I argued how responsibility is absorbed into political systems and institutional logics and subsequently loses its ethical weight. In this chapter I take a different tack: I explore the idea that responsibility cannot be fully understood within political or legal categories. What I propose instead is a concept of responsibility as something that precedes politics and emerges from our encounter with others, from a human exposure that begins before all contracts, structures, and rules. In doing so I turn to the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, who provides a fundamental framework for thinking about responsibility as something that cannot be reduced to reciprocity, symmetry, or duty. Lévinas argues that responsibility is not a consequence of the social order, but a condition of it. It cannot be negotiated; it must be received. What Lévinas offers us is not a political theory of responsibility, but something deeper. His is an ethics of vulnerability, where the subject is already responsible even before any choice, agreement or law occurs. In this chapter I will not simply summarize Lévinas' philosophy, but I will engage with it to strengthen my thesis that responsibility, in its most essential form, is not political but ethical. It arises from the encounter with the Other and does not need any response and no system can replace or formalize it.

2.1 Responsibility without Reciprocity

One of the fundamental aspects of Lévinas's work is that he rejects the idea of responsibility as reciprocal. Often in political and legal contexts, responsibility is based on a reciprocity in which the self is responsible to the Other because the Other is also responsible to him. Rights and duties are negotiated in symmetrical systems. Lévinas completely reverses this idea and argues for a concept of responsibility as something that does not derive from mutual agreement or recognition but derives mostly from an unconditional and non-reciprocal demand. This thinking of his upsets any view of ethics as a fair exchange. As Lévinas writes, "responsibility is not a question of reciprocity, it is the asymmetry of the face to face".[26] Asymmetry should not be understood as a defect, but rather as a main characteristic. I am not responsible because the other recognizes me, but I am responsible because the Other faces me with his vulnerability and exposes me. This exposure arises from a request that I cannot escape, regardless of whether it is reciprocated or not. His intuition challenges the political imagination because it often operates in terms of reciprocity, including rights and duties, obligations and protections. Lévinas, on the other hand, explicitly

[26] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 139.

denies the balance that reciprocity presupposes. "The relationship with the Other is not an association, it is a subjection; it is not the egalitarian relationship of people, but the subjection of the same to the Other."[27] It is not a form of domination, but it is a responsibility that comes before power, consent and the law. I am not the one who chooses when to be responsible, but I am already there. And in doing so, the self is summoned into this condition simply by the pure presence of the other. This is why ethics should not be understood as a decision I make, because it is a condition in which I already find myself. “I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, even if I die for it.”[28] This type of responsibility precedes any political structure, it cannot be institutionalized and it cannot be guaranteed by law.

What I find most compelling about Lévinas’s rejection of reciprocity is how it challenges even the most generous versions of ethics in politics. When responsibility is reciprocal there is always the risk that it will be intrinsically transactional. Lévinas instead offers us a vision in which authentic responsibility is entirely unilateral. I can be responsible to someone who will never recognize my sacrifice or might even refuse it, and this does not affect my obligation. Even the meaning of the ethical subject is revisited from this perspective: the subject is already ethically bound, which contrasts with the autonomous, rights-bearing subject typical of liberal political theory. In denying the reciprocity of responsibility, space is created for an ethics that goes beyond political calculation. Politics begins with symmetry, while ethics begins with disequilibrium. Systems of government and law are highly dependent on rules and accountability, but what Lévinas insists on is a responsibility that cannot be measured, repaid, or fully understood. In a system-governed context, it is precisely the refusal of reciprocity that could become the strongest reminder that ethics does not begin in the structure, but in the recognition of the face of the Other.

2.2 Subjectivity Begins with Responsibility

In most Western philosophy and political theory, a fundamental assumption is that subjectivity comes before responsibility: the self, understood as an autonomous and rational agent, exists first and then chooses to act responsibly toward Others. Lévinas, however, opposes this view and proposes a profound inversion in which subjectivity does not come from the isolated self, but is founded in and through responsibility toward the Other. To be a subject is therefore to be responsible, and not the opposite. The ethical superiority of responsibility over subjectivity redefines how we understand what it means to be human. Lévinas argues that “Subjectivity is not

[27]Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 215.
[28] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 98.

for itself; it is initially for another."[29] The self is not defined by a self-contained entity that deliberately chooses to engage with others on its own terms. It is the self that is called by the face of the other and that demands a response even before any deliberation or consent. The face-to-face encounter is not only a social interaction, but an ethical summons that disrupts and precedes the autonomy of the self. What Lévinas highlights is the profound ethical vulnerability that lies at the heart of subjectivity. I am a subject because I am a hostage of the Other, I am bound to an endless responsibility that I cannot avoid or neutralize with contracts, laws or agreements. "I am defined as a hostage, as a responsibility for others, before any pact, before any agreement".[30] The hostage indicates the involuntary and asymmetric nature of responsibility in which I am responsible for the Other without choice, without reciprocity and equality.

This makes me reflect on the nature of the ethical subject not as an ethical subject but as an accused. I am surprised by Lévinas' language when he says "The self… is a hostage of the Other. The ethical subject is not a sovereign agent, but an accused".[31] The accusation is not to be understood as a reproach, rather it is a form of how we recognize the way in which responsibility shapes and precedes identity. Responsibility is not possessed as a possession a privilege; I am called into question by the need of the Other; So, my subjectivity is mainly a responsibility. From this perspective, responsibility cannot be reduced to politics or law, since it ontologically precedes these same institutions. Lévinas dismantles the foundation for which political systems depend on subjects who are already autonomous agents capable of stipulating contracts and obeying laws, and demonstrates that there is an ethical relationship in which the self is called by the Other even before any political agreement. It is precisely this ethical relationship that constitutes true subjectivity.

What strikes me most about Lévinas' intuition is that it is based on the relationship with the Other. The self is not an isolated individual, because subjectivity is radically intersubjective, and begins in the space of ethical responsibility. It is a subjectivity that is based on openness, vulnerability, exposure, qualities that are too often forgotten in political discourse that tends to valorize power, control, and autonomy. It is not possible to delegate or automate ethical responsibility. "Responsibility for the other constitutes my very identity": my ethical life does not reside in self-affirmation, but in being claimed and transformed by the Other.[32] Lévinas offers us a vision of ethics that does not begin with politics, but begins with the face-to-face encounter that

[29] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114.

[30] Ibid., 117.
[31] Ibid., 117.
[32] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.

calls us beyond ourselves. It is an asymmetrical, non-negotiable subjectivity. It is infinite, and it reveals the depth of human relationality that politics alone will never be able to understand.

2.3 The Space of Ethics

Having established that subjectivity begins with responsibility, that is, an unchosen and infinite obligation towards the Other, it is now important to distinguish between the ethical space that Lévinas describes and the political order in which responsibility is usually placed. The ethical space that Lévinas refers to comes first and is not reducible to political mechanisms. Politics, on the other hand, deals with laws, structures and institutions that are intended to regulate collective life. This separation has important implications for the way in which we conceive the limits of political responsibility and the constant need for an ethics that goes beyond politics.

Political order requires a certain level of reciprocity, equivalence, and universality. It aims to establish equity through laws that apply equally to all citizens. The political realm is an attempt to balance interests, resolve conflicts, and create the right conditions for coexistence. Lévinas, however, emphasizes that ethics cannot be confined within these situations because the ethical relationship is essentially singular and asymmetrical. In the ethical space there can be no equity between the self and the other, especially because the other's demand calls me into question precisely when it cannot be reduced to any system or category. As Lévinas argues, "the ethical relationship is not a relationship of equivalence, but a relationship of responsibility, where the Other has absolute priority."[33] The priority he is referring to is the one that calls into question the basis of political responsibility. Politics is fueled by compromises, negotiations and collective decisions, which require individuals to step back, evaluate options and choose based on the interest of the common good. The ethical relationship, however, is not a matter of evaluating interests, but is an immediate response. It is a "request that must not be discussed, must not be agreed upon".[34] This is an indication that ethical responsibility goes beyond political deliberation, as it is an obligation that cannot be postponed or reduced by bureaucratic procedures. Moreover, the political order has the tendency to abstract the individual into a citizen, as well as a role that is defined by rights and duties. The ethical space, on the other hand, places the other not in a position of citizen or member of a policy, but foregrounds him as a vulnerable singularity whose face is disrupted by abstractions and that demands an immediate ethical response. What Lévinas speaks of is an ethical space made of exposure and proximity, where the confrontation with the fragility and dignity of the Other

[33] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 116.

[34] Ibid., 117.

dominates, going beyond any political categorization. It is a pre-political encounter that resists being reduced to institutional and legal frameworks.

From this point of view, I find that there is an essential tension between ethics and politics that cannot be resolved by reducing one to the Other. Politics organizes social life and protects from some forms of injustice, but there is always the risk of confining the ethical dimension that Lévinas intends. If responsibility becomes exclusively political, then it runs the risk of becoming procedural, depersonalized and dependent on calculating rationality, precisely what Levinas wants to avoid. Although the political order can enforce laws and guarantee rights, it can never replace the singular ethical demand that the Other poses to me. This insight is certainly an invitation to reconsider the weight of responsibility in contemporary society. Political institutions often falter or fail because of bureaucratic indifference, legal formalism, ideological rigidity; in this context, the ethical space is a necessary area in which responsibility can be lived in an authentic way. And it is in the face-to-face encounter that responsibility escapes the limits of politics and resumes its radical infinite and relational character.

I believe that the ethical space that Lévinas proposes is of particular importance today because political discourse often tends to reduce responsibility with respect for laws, contracts or electoral mandates. This reduction completely forgets the ethical irreducibility of the appeal of the Other and risks falling into a seemingly efficient and morally empty politics. Responsibility in the authentic sense will always surpass the political order because it is rooted in a relationship that is not capturable or controllable by any type of system. It is important to distinguish between ethical space and political order because this distinction challenges us to preserve ethics as an independent and founding domain. Politics must not become blind to the vulnerability and singularity that responsibility requires. Ethics, therefore, is not a subset of politics, but is the necessary condition for any meaningful political engagement.

2.4 Fragility as Ethical Ground

If we agree that responsibility begins in the face-to-face relationship with the other and not in the political order, then there is also a need to rethink the foundation of ethical life. In Lévinas's thought, what grounds ethical life does not reside in power, sovereignty or consensus, but is found in fragility. And it is not only the fragility of the Other, but also our own. The self is put into crisis in the encounter with the Other and is exposed to a vulnerability that is not to be understood as a defect, but is the very condition of ethics. Responsibility derives from a kind of ethical exposure, a being for the other that is unstable, unbalanced and mainly open. "Subjectivity is not for itself; it is

for the Other. This means that it is initially responsibility."[35] It is something deeply subversive and counterintuitive, which challenges modern concepts of the subject as sovereign and self-sufficient and puts fragility at the center of ethical meaning. It is an idea that completely distracts institutional ethics: within institutions, responsibility is perceived as codified and conditioned, delimited by roles, hierarchies and rules. Since ethics begins with exposure to the Other, then responsibility also precedes any institutional mediation. It is not about responding within a system, but rather about responding before the system even exists. Fragility from the other annihilates the neutrality of institutional logic and confronts me with a request that cannot be entirely absorbed by roles and rules.

What strikes me is how fragility resists institutionalization. Institutions still have the task of protecting and caring for the vulnerable, but they can also flatten and depersonalize vulnerability itself. Bureaucracy does not feel compassion, procedures do not falter. However, in Lévinas's philosophy, ethics begins precisely from trembling, from the inability to remain impassive in the face of the suffering of Others. Lévinas writes, "the face speaks to me and invites me into a relationship", and this invitation is not followed by guarantees, but is accompanied by a risk: being ethically alive means being vulnerable to this risk.[36] It is something that we can currently find in political institutions that define themselves as ethical authorities but that most of the time fail to respond to the singularities of human experience. Regardless of whether it is a question of health systems, refugee policies, or legal protocols, the person often gets lost in the function. What Lévinas warns us about is precisely this reduction and reminds us instead that ethics is born outside of these contexts. He does not want to abolish them, because he does not completely reject politics or institutions, but he insists on the fact that they must be capable of responding to the ethical appeal that precedes them.

What emerges from his reflection is a strong rethinking of responsibility as a fragile and personal event that cannot be externalized. In a world obsessed with power, control and efficiency, Lévinas proposes a beginning where control ends. The fragility of the Other is the foundation of ethics. Identifying fragility as the foundation of ethics means resisting the temptation of convenience of moral certainty and institutional delegation. It means being able to accept that responsibility does not derive from mastery but emerges from being disturbed and interrupted by another. Ethics is a continuous exposure and vulnerability to which we must remain faithful.

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[35] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114.

[36] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 198.

2.5 Final Thoughts

What emerges from this analysis of responsibility as something that goes beyond politics, through Lévinas's thought, is that it cannot be delegated to institutional frameworks, legal codes and political systems. In its deepest sense, responsibility cannot be thrown, distributed or assigned. It is not a function to be performed or a task to be completed. It is a response that arises from the irreducible presence of the Other, an ethical relationship that comes before any political pact.

In this chapter I have argued how responsibility is redefined by Lévinas not as an act of reciprocity or a fair exchange, but as an asymmetric and infinite request that emerges simply because the other calls me and exists. The face of the other interrupts my freedom, destabilizes my ego and places me before a request that I have not chosen but cannot refuse either. As Lévinas writes "The self is the one who is... under accusation, and who can never get out of this situation".[37] This idea of responsibility contrasts sharply with the ethics depersonalized by the political order, in which actions are proceduralized and the singularity of human relationships is missing. Although institutions are necessary, they can never take the place of ethical life. The responsibility that really matters is the one that cannot be delegated, that precedes politics and remains even when politics fails. It is the responsibility that is based on exposure and vulnerability, where we remain exposed to the other, to judgment and ourselves. This is what Lévinas defines as the heart of ethics.

[37] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 112.

3 Responsibility in Tension

After analyzing how political frameworks mostly fail to fully grasp ethical responsibility, especially through Arendt and Bauman, and how Lévinas proposes responsibility as an essential ethical requirement that precedes politics, in this chapter I will explore a crucial dialogue between Jan Patočka and Emmanuel Lévinas on the topic of the care of the soul. My aim is to understand how their thinking influences our understanding of responsibility today.

Both philosophers reject the idea of reducing ethics to systematic and political frameworks. Patočka locates responsibility in the inner life of the subject, which awakens through history and the search for authenticity. He argues that responsibility is like the individual who "feels the weight of history" and commits to an "authentic life".[38] Nevertheless, his thinking remains tied to the reflexive commitment of the self. Lévinas, instead, deeply redirects responsibility as a call that comes from the flight of the Other, which is "prior to the free subject" and precedes the voluntary choice of the subject.[39] Responsibility does not therefore reside in the care of one's own soul, much less is it a political obligation, but is mostly an infinite ethical need that interrupts and goes beyond the self.

I argue that Lévinas radicalizes what Patočka begins: Patočka values internal authenticity and historical responsibility, while Lévinas manifests an ethical demand that transcends the self entirely. This tension investigates our understanding of responsibility as an exposure that enables political life, but at the same time cannot be reduced to politics itself. Responsibility represents the ethical foundation on which politics depends, and not vice versa.

3.1 From Systems to a Shared Rejection of Modern Ethics

Both philosophers address the dehumanizing tendencies of modernity and reject any kind of ethics that is confined to impersonal systems, rules, and institutions. Both Patočka and Lévinas have in common the goal of reintroducing fragility, disturbance, and existential risk at the center of responsibility. Yet, their approaches are profoundly different.

Patočka recognizes that modern culture is plagued by the lack of care for the soul, he finds himself in this spiritual insensitivity founded in the predominance of technical and bureaucratic structures. He finds in moments of rupture, which occur when human existence is shaken, the existential rooting of ethical responsibility. In fact, he writes that on the "front line of life and death" individuals experience what he calls "solidarity of the shaken".[40] In these moments of crisis

[38] Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 39.

[39] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114.

[40] Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 134.

the self is vulnerable to ethical awakening, and experiences what is lost in the everyday routine and discovers the foundations of meaning. So, for Patočka, responsibility arises from an inner turmoil that comes from a confrontation with mortality and historical contingency that elevates the soul towards authenticity. It is not a mechanical ethic, but a spiritual movement where one converts internally. Lévinas agrees that modern systems suppress authentic ethical life, but his reflection goes beyond the existential terrain of the soul: ethics does not arise from self-discipline or from an internal struggle that one chooses, but emerges from the Other. He argues that "responsibility for the Other is an antecedent to any free consent", and ethics begins with an overwhelming encounter, a face-to-face request that speaks even before I can reflect.[41] In fact, Levinas comes to define responsibility as a form of hostage by the Other.[42] Their divergence lies in the fact that Patočka identifies responsibility in an existential path of self-transformation; Lévinas, instead, places it outside the self, in the irreducible presence of the Other. In Patočka's philosophy, ethics needs the awakening of one's soul; in Lévinas's, ethics requires exposure to the other before the soul or reflection come into play. Despite their differences, both highlight how fragility is a fundamental element for moral experience. Patočka, in fact, thinks that fragility serves to shake the self to awaken it to historicity, and for Lévinas it breaks the claim of autonomy of the self.

We see on both sides how there is a move away from systematic ethics and a move towards understanding responsibility as rooted in the vulnerability of the individual. However, it is the asymmetrical relationship described by Lévinas that completely upsets self-sufficiency and opens the door to an ethics that is not governable by systems. In any case, both of their insights are urgent today, given that we find ourselves in a context in which political and bureaucratic institutions tend to reduce responsibility to obedience. For Patočka, only an awakened soul is capable of resisting ideological normalization. Lévinas reminds us that this awakening must always begin beyond self-awareness, in a responsibility that is not chosen, but imposed.

3.2 Authenticity and Substitution

There is one main question that separates Patočka and Lévinas on the probelm of responsibility, and it is this: does ethical life begin with the inner awakening of the self, or does it come from something else, like a call that interrupts this awakening? This is not just a theoretical distinction, but it has real implications for how we understand moral life today, especially when political systems do not recognize us as responsible, and responsibility must come from elsewhere.

[41] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114.

[42] Ibid., 117.

As we know, according to Patočka, "care of the soul" is the main movement through which an individual automatically becomes responsible. It is not something that begins with rules or duties imposed from the outside, but occurs through an internal transformation, a turning toward what cannot be systematized and calculated. It is a movement that moves away from distraction and approaches the truth. In fact, he describes the soul as an orientation, a movement toward a true life, a life that responds to what is essential in being. Thus understood, responsibility is a gesture of awakening that occurs through questioning, confrontation with finitude and death, which then leads us to live authentically. Patočka argues that ethical responsibility begins in history as an existential gesture of freedom and lucidity.

Lévinas, however, goes beyond this theory and pushes it in a completely different direction. Although he agrees that responsibility cannot be reduced to norms or institutions, he distances himself from the idea that it can begin with any internal movement of the self. In his view, even the sincerest act of introspection risks not emerging from the closed system of the same. It is for this reason that Lévinas insists on the fact that subjectivity is not for itself, but is above all for another.[43] The ethical subject is not sovereign and does not decide when to take care or not; it is already obliged and held hostage by the request of the Other. This need does not come through historical consciousness and reflection but comes through what Lévinas defines as substitution.[44] I do not choose responsibility; it is she who precedes me and chooses me. I am implicated even before I am aware of it. If Patočka invites the soul to awaken, Lévinas argues that I am already awakened because I am interrupted by the face of the Other who calls me.

The contrast that has just emerged is not to be understood as a contradiction, but rather as a tension. Patočka's reflection on inner authenticity remains fascinating, especially because it responds to a world that numbs us with political abstractions and distractions. Looking at Lévinas, however, we might ask whether this focus on the self is not too focused on subjectivity. Lévinas offers us a more radical ethics in which the self is completely decentralized and replaced by a self-for-another. In this way, he highlights the fragility of the ethical framework that begins with the self, even a self that aims at authenticity. In a context in which the self is often defined as the source of morality, Lévinas presents us with an ethics that begins differently. It does not begin in the care of the soul but comes from the external demand that I cannot ignore and that I did not initiate. In Patočka we find how to live historically; in Lévinas we find how we are already responsible before any history.

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[43] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114.
[44] Ibid., 117.

3.3 Responsibility Before the Polis

Both Patočka and Lévinas resonate with a deep dissatisfaction with modern political ethics, which tends to minimize accountability to rules, procedures, and consensus. In doing so, however, they once again express themselves through different points of view. Their divergence is crucial. Patočka identifies the collapse of authentic life in modern political systems. He reflects on the polis in a nostalgic and at the same time existential way, longing for a space for human beings in which they can live in truth towards each other and towards history. In his view, the essential function of the polis is to protect the care of the soul, not to replace it.[45] It is only through the confrontation with mortality and meaning that citizens can resist the dehumanization brought about by bureaucratic modernity. Political ethics is not something primary but is based on a more original ethical orientation.

Lévinas takes this concept even further. He demolishes the assumption that responsibility can begin within the political sphere. Politics always arrives too late, attempting to regulate the infinite asymmetry of ethical obligation and to distribute what cannot be measured: "Justice remains justice only in a society in which there is no forgetting of the face".[46] The irreducible, fragile, and singular face of the Other demands a responsibility that cannot be contained by any law or institution. This explains why responsibility, as Lévinas understands it, not only comes before the polis chronologically, but is beyond the polis in its very logic. Political ethics asks what the rules are, while ethical responsibility asks what the other person is asking for. And it is precisely the request of the Other that, contrary to the rules, cannot be exchanged or generalized.

In my view, this is where Lévinas radicalizes what Patočka begins. Patočka places responsibility in a context of shared history and existential authenticity. His soul is still searching for a polis to inhabit. For Lévinas, however, the soul is expropriated by the Other even before it can find a space for it. Responsibility is not based on the care of the self, much less in the citizen's duty towards the republic: it is rooted in the continuous exposure to the vulnerability of the Other. It is important to understand that this concept is still important today. We find ourselves living in a context in which politics tries to moralize and we must not stop asking ourselves what kind of ethics we are appealing to. Political responsibility is always postponed, distributed and discussed. The responsibility that precedes the polis, the one that comes before every contract and institution, is the one where we are not only responsible towards society. We are responsible for the Other, even

[45] Jan Patočka, "The Spiritual Person and the Intellectual," in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), *Second Essay.*
[46] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 159.

before society begins. Lévinas makes us reflect on the fact that politics must not be based on agreement, but on obligation. It must not be based on systems of justice, but on the recognition of the Other. If this were not there, the polis would forget the face, and consequently allow violence.

3.4 What Remains Is the Ethical

Although I would like to reconcile the two philosophers, the tension between them is not something I can smooth out. Ultimately, it is what makes their meeting today productive. They speak from different existential points of view, where Patočka roots responsibility in the awakening of the soul to history, and Lévinas places it in the rupture caused by the face of the Other. They are two different ways of understanding what it means to be human. Patočka's legacy is based on the idea that the human being becomes responsible in a process of philosophical awakening – the care of the soul. This care, however, is not expressed as a quiet introspection, but manifests itself as an authentic existential shock through the confrontation with death and the refusal to participate in the impersonal mechanisms of modern life. The human being is a spiritual being that when it resists the reduction to social functions and roles becomes capable of truth. According to Patočka, the resistance just described represents an essential ethical gesture.[47] Lévinas does not question that the modern world suppresses responsibility, but completely changes its terrain. I cannot generate responsibility only by awakening myself; it is something that happens to me, it manifests itself by interrupting me without my being able to control it. It is not the self that makes responsibility possible, but responsibility that creates the self.[48] And this inversion is fundamental because while Patočka argues that responsibility is something that the soul must assume, Lévinas shows how it is something that the self undergoes. It is not based on authenticity, but on exposure.

Patočka gives great importance to history. He argues that responsibility is defined through events, crises, the community of the upset. In fact, he thought that Europe could renew itself only by recovering the truthfulness of the Socratic question. What Lévinas does is shift the center from history to the Other. In doing so, he does not imply that the other is necessarily European, or part of our community. It is the stranger who calls me, someone who is completely external to me and interrupts my life and upsets my categories. I believe that this represents the turning point: Lévinas puts us in front of the fact that ethical responsibility cannot be theorized from a distance. We cannot prepare ourselves. It is that something that remains even when everything collapses, when history fails, when politics compromises, when even philosophy is questioned. Ethics survives. In this point

[47] Jan Patocka, *La Cura Dell'anima* (Orthotes Editrice, 2019).
[48] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114.

of arrival, Patočka puts us in front of the fragility of the human condition and pushes us to take care of the soul even when systems would like to silence it; Lévinas, however, shows us how fragility is not something we simply experience, but is something we respond to. It is the fragility of the Other that has the last word, not mine. This is why there cannot be a synthesis between Patočka and Lévinas, but only tension: this is not what paralyzes you, but clarifies you. It is the tension that tells you that responsibility is neither philosophical nor political but is a spiritual attitude; it represents ethics.

3.5 Final Thoughts

In this chapter I have attempted to engage Patočka and Lévinas in a critical dialogue to highlight the complex terrain of ethical responsibility today. Both philosophers refuse to reduce ethics to systems, and they challenge the dehumanizing forces of modernity. However, their views on responsibility differ significantly.

Through the care of the soul, Patočka offers us a rich existential horizon in which historical awareness is deeply linked to the authenticity of the self. He asks us to awaken to our shared vulnerability and to live responsibly throughout history. Although hers is a powerful idea, it remains anchored to the initiative of the self and to history. Lévinas, on the other hand, radicalizes this thought and offers a concept of responsibility as something that disrupts, but above all precedes the self. In his ethics, responsibility is not grounded in political systems or historical narratives. It begins in the direct encounter with the Other, who calls and commands even before I can choose or reflect. This responsibility cannot be contained or delegated by politics, but it is nevertheless the ethical ground on which an authentic politics can be founded. It is only by acknowledging the radical ethical requirement that politics can be imagined anew, and not as a place where responsibility begins, but as a fragile space that arises from a previous ethical commitment.
The tension analyzed between Lévinas and Patočka does not provide easy answers, but it certainly clarifies the meaning of what it means to be responsible today: to be able to respond to the call of the Other in a world that continually tries to justify, escape and forget.

4 Conclusion

This thesis aims to investigate what it means to be responsible when we live in a world where political systems tend to cancel moral reflection and where the self is often tempted to take refuge in internal authenticity. Through a philosophical investigation of politics, modernity and ethical thought, I have argued that responsibility cannot be based on systems and the sovereign self. It is something that instead derives more radically from the ethical relationship, that is, an external request that interrupts and precedes any role and decision.

My investigation is divided into three main chapters. In the first chapter, I examined the failures of modern ethics in the political sphere, drawing on the thought of Husserl, Arendt and Bauman. I then introduced the concept of responsibility, as Patočka intends it, of care for the soul. In the next chapter I analyzed the idea of responsibility from an ethical point of view, turning to Lévinas' philosophy of the Other. His ethics replaces political rationality and existential will, proposing a concept of responsibility as a form of non-reciprocal substitution. In the last chapter, I introduced the dialogue between Patočka and Lévinas, arguing that Lévinas radicalizes and deepens Patočka's ethics, demonstrating how responsibility is not something that arises from introspection, but begins in the confrontation with the Other. In these chapters I wanted to demonstrate how responsibility goes beyond politics, but at the same time must also know how and when to return to it to refund it.

The question that guided this path was: what does it mean to be morally responsible in a world governed by systems? What is responsibility? The conclusion I reached is that responsibility is not a choice, a possession or a function, but a need that demands me. It is not based on roles, reciprocity and mutuality. It is asymmetric, often unfelt, and above all it is fragile. Through Lévinas I have shown how responsibility precedes freedom: I am responsible even before choosing, deciding and even before fully understanding. Responsibility is the structure of ethical subjectivity, which Lévinas defines as substitution because one is responsible in place of the Other and one is ethically claimed in a way that decentralizes the self. Contrary to what has just been described, political systems have the tendency to institutionalize responsibility with laws, structures and roles. These are indeed necessary for justice, but they always risk turning into mechanisms that depersonalize individuals. As demonstrated by Bauman and Arendt, modern politics can crush moral responsibility by transforming individuals into officials. Patočka's response is that of an appeal to care for the soul, but his ethics remains focused on authenticity and historical resistance. True responsibility does not come from oneself or from politics, but begins with the encounter, from that relationship with the Other that destabilizes me. Responsibility must go beyond politics to maintain its ethical weight, but it must also be able to return to it to support action and justice. Beyond and back – it is this movement that keeps us ethically aware in a lost world.

In today’s world, where we are surrounded by political crises, institutional failures and ethical loss, the issue of responsibility is not abstract, but urgent. We are constantly in a situation where we are strongly tempted to postpone or diminish ethical reflection. Responsibility is often reduced to being nothing more than a legal category, a task or a cure. In such a context, the deepest meaning of responsibility, as a response to the suffering of others, is in danger of being forgotten. My work insists on recovering this deeper meaning. I believe that if we resist the reduction of ethics

to politics and authenticity, we can rediscover the most radical and vulnerable concept of responsibility. And this is important because only through this perspective can we address the failures of systems without falling into despair. In this sense, responsibility is not a safe or comfortable position, nor is it granted by authorities. It consists in the risk of exposing oneself to the need of another who transcends our categories. And it is in this risk that I find that the individual and the political community can awaken to the meaning of ethical life.

If we accept the idea of responsibility as rooted in the ethical relationship, and not by oneself or by the system, there will be significant implications. First, political institutions must be constantly challenged by ethics, and not only as regulatory structures, but also as spaces in which ethical life is possible or repressed. The legitimacy of a political system should not be assessed only by its stability, but also by how it allows people to remain ethically aware in the face of Others. Furthermore, ethics cannot retreat from the political. Although Lévinas distinguishes the ethical sphere from the political sphere, his work also suggests that politics needs ethics in order not to become indifferent and oppressive. Ethics, therefore, must learn to return to politics, to ground it and question it. Even the responsible subject should not be understood as the autonomous individual, but is the one who is exposed, interrupted. This is a new form of ethical subjectivity that is based on the reactivity of the other. Finally, responsibility can never be solved, but it is an infinite task. It is not something I do once, but it calls me continuously, especially in situations where it is not requested and is not recognized.

My thesis has been fundamentally based on a philosophical and existential investigation of responsibility, but I am aware of its shortcomings. I do not provide a systematic explanation of how ethical responsibility can be translated into political frameworks. My return to politics, although stated in principle, remains underdeveloped in its structures. Furthermore, my reflection is mainly placed at the intro of a European philosophical context. Surely alternative traditions would be useful to provide significant contributions to the question of responsibility especially when we look at historical violence, intergenerational responsibility and global injustice. Furthermore, the figure of Lévinas is central to this analysis, but I have not ventured to explore his later works or the theological dimensions of his thought, which others might certainly find relevant.

From this, however, some perspectives on possible future research emerge. An interesting direction would certainly be to examine how Lévinas's ethical responsibility can inspire a concrete theory of political action, on how we can think of institutions that preserve the singularity of the ethical relationship, or on what a politics based on asymmetry would be like. Another research could instead study the role of narration, testimony or witnessing in the transmission of responsibility, to understand how to cultivate reactivity.

The responsibility I have been discussing is not comfortable. It is not an idea that reassures me or affirms the self. It is a concept that troubles me, that calls me to respond when I do not have to, when no answer is easy, but at the same time I cannot be indifferent to it. It is an ethical subjectivity that precedes identity, justice and reciprocity.

In this thesis I have tried to remain faithful to this disturbance. Trying to understand what it means to respond, especially in an age when forgetting is easier, represents my hope to help keep the question alive. Responsibility is not resolved once and for all. It needs to be repeated, as if each time were always the first, and the need for that vulnerability of those who have been called cannot remain silent. Even if responsibility begins beyond politics, it must not remain there: it must know how and when to return to awaken justice from within.

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