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The Failure(s) of Ethics:
The Holocaust and Its Reverberations

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I don't know about the moral law. Does it dwell in everyone?

Primo Levi, *Other People's Trades*

I begin with words of thanks, congratulations, and tribute: I am grateful to Professor Frank Nicosia for the kind invitation to deliver the 2008 Raul Hilberg Lecture and for the hospitality he has so generously coordinated. I congratulate the University of Vermont for the establishment and development of the Carolyn and Leonard Miller Center for Holocaust Studies, which is destined to become a place of international importance in its field. The scholars at the Center, all of them known to me personally, are outstanding. The tribute I want to pay is to Raul Hilberg himself, for his scholarship and example have influenced my thinking about the Holocaust and its reverberations more than I can say.

It is a special privilege to speak in the lecture series that so deservedly honors Raul Hilberg at the University of Vermont, where he taught with great distinction and intensity for decades. Hilberg denied that he was a philosopher, but I think there were deep philosophical and ethical currents in his thinking, teaching, and research. I believe that he might well approve of the topic "The Failure(s) of Ethics," which I am addressing

on the 70th anniversary week of the vast pogrom, euphemistically called *Kristallnacht* that raged through the Third Reich in early November 1938.

I will not concentrate on that disaster, but it is worth recalling that seventy years ago tonight (November 10), Jewish synagogues, cemeteries, hospitals, schools, businesses, and homes throughout the Reich had been looted, wrecked, and often set aflame. Scores of Jews were killed; thousands more were arrested and marched off to the newly enlarged concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen. The Jews' German neighbors, not strangers, inflicted much of this damage while police followed orders not to interfere and arrested many of those who had been victimized. Meanwhile, with few exceptions, fire brigades followed their orders, too: Let torched synagogues burn, but protect Aryan property nearby. *Kristallnacht* ended the illusion that anything resembling normal Jewish life was still possible in the Third Reich. Encouraged by the Nazi leadership, carried out by ordinary Germans, abetted by countless onlookers, the November pogrom of 1938, a decisive prelude to the Holocaust, centrally involved a failure of ethics.

My title, "The Failure(s) of Ethics: The Holocaust and Its Reverberations," the epigraph from Primo Levi that accompanies it, and the 70th anniversary of *Kristallnacht* start these reflections on a down beat. So I hasten to add that my intention is not to make that down beat the last one, but instead to explore how the failure(s) of ethics—plural and singular—form an agenda that humanity ignores at its peril.

To set the stage further for an exploration of the failure(s) of ethics, a word about ethics itself is important.¹ Ethics is as old as human existence and also as new as today's dilemmas and tomorrow's possibilities. Thus, ethics is both the same and different as

experience unfolds and history develops. Among the defining characteristics of human life are our abilities to think, make judgments, and remember. Human beings are also identified by webs of social relationships. We are members of families and societies. As history has developed, we have become participants in political and religious traditions, and we are citizens of countries, too. Enriched and complicated by memory of past actions and their consequences, these characteristics and relationships enable and require us to make evaluations. With its structure and environment necessitating that we have to make choices and live or die with the consequences of our decisions, human life is unavoidably inseparable from distinctions between what is right and wrong, just and unjust, good and evil.

We human beings deal constantly with factual matters, but we also make value judgments, issue prescriptive statements, and formulate normative appraisals. In short, we try to figure out what we ought to do. Few of us are always and entirely content with the way events happen to turn out. How, we ask, *should* they come out? Why, we wonder, have so many things happened that *ought not* to have taken place? There is nothing new about these realities and questions. They have been with humanity from its beginnings.

Whenever concepts such as *should* and *ought*, *right* and *wrong*, *good* and *evil* are employed, ethics comes into play, but what it means to say so requires some closer looks. Many factors enter into the evaluations that people make. They include our cultural backgrounds, religious training or lack of it, the influences of parents, teachers, and friends, to mention but a few. Ethics can refer simply to the value judgments that people make and to the beliefs that people hold—individually and collectively—about what is

right and wrong, good and evil, precious and worthless, beautiful and ugly, or sacred and profane. Value judgments affect everything we do: from the ways that individuals spend their money to the interests that nations defend. Taken in this sense, it can be argued that every person, community, and nation is ethical. All of them have normative beliefs and make evaluative judgments.

Ethics, however, involves much more than a primarily descriptive use of that term suggests. For example, ethics also refers to the study of value judgments and the ways in which they influence—and are influenced by—institutions. Such study has historical dimensions; it may concentrate, for instance, on how a society's values have changed or developed over time. In one way or another, work of this sort has also been going on for centuries. Its roots are in the earliest human awareness that groups and persons are not identical, that they think and act differently.

How important is wealth? Is religion desirable? What kinds of education should the young receive? Versions of these questions are ancient, and responses to them both reflect and depend upon the value commitments that people make. Historically, people have taken varied positions on ethical issues, even as they have exhibited persistent continuity about some fundamental convictions such as those, for instance, that condemn murder. If ethics is inseparable from human existence, however, the manifestations of that fact are many and varied. Arguably, study of ethical beliefs and practices throughout human history is likely to confirm that their variety is pronounced as much as their commonality.

Ethics does not end with either description or study of human belief and action. The core of ethics, in fact, lies elsewhere. People make value judgments when they say,

for example, that “abortion is wrong” or that “the death penalty is right.” Does the variety of values, and especially the arguments that conflicting value judgments can produce, mean that value judgments are culturally relative and even personally subjective? Or are at least some value judgments objectively grounded and true for everyone?

At least for me, one of Raul Hilberg’s most important lectures was delivered in 1996 when he spoke at a University of Oregon conference on ethics after the Holocaust. Hilberg asserted that ethics is the same today as it was yesterday and even the day before yesterday; it is the same after Auschwitz as it was before and during the lethal operations at that place. Especially with regard to needless and wanton killing, he emphasized, ethics is the same for everyone, everywhere. Hilberg left no unclarity about his position. Such killing is wrong. We know that “in our bones,” he said, for such knowledge is the heritage of many years.²

Meanwhile, for centuries philosophers, religious teachers, and many more of us human beings have debated whether value judgments are culturally relative and even personally subjective, or whether at least some value judgments are objectively grounded and true for everyone, as Hilberg seems to have thought. Such issues are crucial parts of ethics as normative inquiry. Agreement about how to answer those questions is not universal, but ethics would not be *ethics* if it failed to emphasize the importance of critical inquiry about the values that people hold. For example, much can be learned by asking, “Is this value judgment true, and, if so, why?” Much can also be learned by asking, “What makes some values or virtues positive (courage, for instance, or honesty

and trust) and what makes others negative (hatred, for example, or selfishness and infidelity)?”

In the form of critical inquiry, ethics contends that nothing is truly good or right simply because someone desires or values it. In fact, to say that something is good or right simply because someone values it would contradict one of our most fundamental experiences: The differences between what is valuable and what is not depend on more than an individual’s feelings or a culture’s preferences. We know this because our value judgments can be *mistaken*. We often criticize, change, or even reject them because we learn that they are wrong. Thus, while people may not agree about values, the questions that critical inquiry raises—for example, how should we evaluate the values we hold, and which values matter most?—are at the heart of ethics. Again, such insights are not new. Buddha and Confucius, Moses and Jesus, Socrates and Plato brought them to life long ago, and even those ethical pioneers had predecessors in earlier history.

Ethics is as old as human existence itself. Its basic questions, concerns, and fundamental vocabulary have exhibited considerable continuity amidst the accompanying diversity. One of the reasons is that another feature of human life also remains deeply entrenched, namely, that human beings so often make bad judgments, inflict harm, lay waste to things that are good, treat each other brutally, rob, rape, kill, and even commit genocide. Ethics attempts to check and correct those tendencies by urging us to make human life more caring and humane and by showing how it can be more just and promising. Such work is an indispensable part of ethics. But, alas, this juncture between thought and action, theory and practice, is also where the failure(s) of ethics become most obvious and fraught.

The singular failure of ethics is that ethics has not made us better than we are. What we are, moreover, is often far from being what should make us proud to be human. Human-inflicted abuse of human life and the world that is our home, including inaction and indifference in the face of that abuse, is often so great that shame about our humanity ought to take precedence over our pride about it. One implication is that ethics seems too fragile and weak to do what we hope, at least in our better moments, it can accomplish.

There are at least two dimensions about this fragility and weakness that deserve additional mention. First, there has to be something universal about ethics, if what could be called the *logic of ethics* is not to be riddled by contradiction. This point is illustrated by the frequent appeals that are made these days to *human* rights. If such rights are real, they do not belong just to Americans, to men, to white-skinned folks, but to all who are human. By now, there are long and even growing lists of these rights, many of them found in United Nations documents. This fact signifies that considerable agreement can be found where ethics is concerned, but the appearance of agreement may not match reality, for so much depends on what key concepts mean and how they are interpreted, factors that frequently bring disagreement to the fore. In principle, agreement about all of those matters may be possible, but possibility can be a long way from reality. One of the most important failures of ethics, then, is that it seems to promise more agreement than it ever delivers.

Related to that problem is a second dimension about the failure of ethics that is of even greater importance. It can be put this way: Ethics tries but too rarely succeeds to bring the human will into conformity with sound ethical judgment. Or worse, some forms of the “ethical” do succeed in bringing the human will into conformity with

judgment that appears to be ethical, and all hell breaks loose as a result. There will be more to say on the latter point momentarily, but the key point for now is that ethics, try as it may, seems incapable of bridging the gap between what people ought to do and what they actually do. Sadly, that gap has long been, unrelentingly so, an abyss of torture, slaughter, misery, human rights abuses, injustice, mass killing, and waste.

But wait, it may be objected, the failure(s) I am attributing to ethics are misplaced. They are not the failures of ethics but the failures of men and women, of groups and communities, that fail to follow the light and to heed the insight that ethical reflection provides, at least when that reflection is sound. This objection fails, I believe, because it depends upon a distinction between the ethical and the human that cannot pass scrutiny. Ethics is not independent of human existence but is instead an expression, a reflection, of it. Ethics may correspond to or embody transcendent or transcendental realities that are not entirely human alone, but even then, ethics remains a human project, if not a human projection. So, yes, the gap between thought and action, between theory and practice, where ethics is concerned is about *our* failure, but our *failure* includes the failure(s) of ethics, which are not separable from our human existence. Our reason and our freedom have crucial parts to play in establishing the ethical. Our reason and our freedom also outstrip the ethical, and the ethical struggles, usually in vain, to keep reason and freedom under its less than fully persuasive sway.

Ethical theory and teaching have a long history, but it hard to say with clarity and confidence that humankind has been forever making moral progress. Arguably the twentieth century was the most murderous in human history. There is no assurance that the twenty-first will be an improvement in spite of the fact that there may be more talk

than ever about ethics and our need for it. Human life is so full of discouragement, cynicism, and despair produced by human folly, miscalculation, and wrongdoing that one can scarcely call ethics successful. True, absent ethics, we would be much worse than we are, but the slaughter-bench of history, as the philosopher Hegel rightly called it, does not allow much comfort to be taken from that fact.

Now, I want to shift gears to illustrate further, historically and personally, why I am concentrating on the failure(s) of ethics. Having studied the Holocaust—taught and written about that catastrophe—for almost forty years, the questions that confound me continue to grow. As historical research proceeds, issues about *how* and *why* the Holocaust happened have not been put to rest, at least not entirely. As a philosopher tripped up by history and by the Holocaust in particular, I am especially provoked by questions such as these: What happened to ethics during the Holocaust? What should ethics be and what can it do after the Holocaust?

Absent the overriding of moral sensibilities, if not the collapse or collaboration of ethical traditions, the Holocaust could not have happened. Its devastation may have deepened conviction that there is a crucial difference between right and wrong; its destruction may have renewed awareness about the importance of ethical standards and conduct. But Birkenau, the chief killing center at Auschwitz and thus a kind of epicenter of the Holocaust, also continues to cast a disturbing shadow over basic beliefs concerning right and wrong, human rights, and the hope that human beings will learn from the past.

The Holocaust did not pronounce the death of ethics, but it did prove that ethics is immensely vulnerable, that it can be overridden, misused and perverted, and that no simple reaffirmation of pre-Holocaust ethics, as if nothing had happened, will do any

more. Too much has happened for that, including the fact that the shadow of Birkenau so often shows Western religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions to be problematic. Far from preventing the Holocaust, they were at times seriously implicated in that catastrophe.

We can explore at least some of these themes in greater detail by reflecting on insights from the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi. Consider, in particular, what Levi called “the gray zone,” which was the title he gave to one of the most influential essays to emerge from the Holocaust, a chapter in his remarkable book *The Drowned and the Saved*.

Levi’s Holocaust experiences led him to reflect on language. “If the Lagers had lasted longer,” he observed, “a new, harsh language would have been born: and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer.”³

Arguably, the Holocaust did not last long enough to produce fully the new language of which Levi spoke, but as survivors and scholars continue their struggle to describe, analyze, and explain what happened during those dark times, new and, in their own way, harsh concepts have emerged. One thinks, for instance, of Lawrence Langer’s *choiceless choices*, a term now used to identify the dilemmas created by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, who often put Jews and other victims in circumstances where they had to make decisions among hideous options that could not even be described as involving so-called lesser of evils.⁴ Or, to cite a second example, there is Terrence Des

Pres's *excremental assault*, the concept he created to refer to the ways in which lack of sanitation in the Holocaust's ghettos and camps—whether intended by the Germans or not—humiliated and besieged every prisoner and killed many of them.⁵ Even *genocide*, the word coined by Raphael Lemkin, was added to humanity's vocabulary only while the Holocaust raged.⁶

No list of terms belonging to the new, harsh vocabulary required by Holocaust studies could begin to be complete if it failed to include Primo Levi's *gray zone*. He used that phrase specifically to refer to the “incredibly complicated internal structure” of Auschwitz, which created moral ambiguity and compromise in ways large and small. He was struck particularly, but not only, by the ways in which the German organization of the camp led Jews, however reluctantly, to become complicit in the destruction of their own people. Focusing attention especially on the *Sonderkommando*, the Jews who were conscripted to work in the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Levi said that “conceiving and organizing [those] squads was National Socialism's most demonic crime.”⁷

Levi's gray zone, however, was not restricted to such radical examples. Emphasizing “the extreme pressure of the Lager,” he noted that the number of “gray, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise” was and remains more the rule than the exception in any time or place, but in Auschwitz those ranks swelled, for survival depended on finding or taking some advantage that made nearly all survivors—Levi included himself—“the rightful owners of a quota of guilt.”⁸ Levi amplified those feelings in a chapter on “Shame,” which is an important sequel to the reflection on “The Gray Zone” that precedes it. “The ‘saved’ of the Lager were not the best,” said Levi.

“What I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the ‘gray zone,’ the spies. It was not a certain rule (there were none, nor are there certain rules in human matters), but it was nevertheless a rule. I felt innocent, yes, but enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search of a justification in my own eyes and those of others. The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died.”⁹

Levi’s understated philosophical view held that “each of us is a mixture of good and not so good,”¹⁰ but his interpretation of the gray zone rejected invidious moral equivalencies. “I do not know,” he wrote, “and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer.”¹¹ As Levi made clear by his analysis of Muhsfeld, a German perpetrator who momentarily, but only momentarily, showed pity when a Jewish girl somehow remained alive in Auschwitz after gassing, the gray zone could include a very wide range of men and women, but immense differences remained among them. Compared to Muhsfeld, Levi could rightly call himself a guiltless victim. Considering himself from other angles, Levi could not exempt himself from guilt, relatively minor though it might be.

In the main, however, Levi did not intend his analysis of the gray zone to result in condemning judgments but instead to show how Auschwitz could “confuse our need to judge”¹²—and rightly so—and then to warn his readers about the ambiguities and compromises that could be lurking for them, a point driven home at the end of his famous chapter on “The Gray Zone” in *The Drowned and the Saved*. That chapter extends the gray zone beyond the confines of Auschwitz as it concludes with reflection on Chaim

Rumkowski, whose fate it was to lead the Jewish Council that the Germans forced the Jews to establish in the Lodz ghetto. Suggesting that Rumkowski's story contains "in an exemplary form the almost physical necessity with which political coercion gives birth to that ill-defined sphere of ambiguity and compromise" that constitutes the gray zone, Levi's chapter concludes that "like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility. Willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death, and that close by the train is waiting."¹³ Levi spoke of the gray zone in the singular, but his analysis made clear that this multi-faceted and multi-layered reality constituted gray *zones* that were not and are not confined to one time or place.

Throughout *The Drowned and the Saved* and especially in its chapter on "The Gray Zone," a crucial tension emerges between Primo Levi's caution about making moral judgments and his persistent use of ethical evaluations. Levi understood that human cravings for simple understanding include the need "to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to emulate Christ's gesture on Judgment Day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates."¹⁴ The gray zone, however, defied such neat separations.

Nevertheless, moral judgments resound in Levi's writing. As noted, for example, he never hesitated to call the creation of the *Sonderkommando* a "demonic crime," the worst committed by the National Socialists.¹⁵ In the introduction to the German edition of his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi said that he had written that book "to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people, to . . . remind them of what they have done, and say to them: 'I am alive, and I would like to understand you in order to

judge you.”¹⁶ Levi added that he did not hate the German people, but then he delivered a comment whose moral critique was as devastating as it was understated: “I cannot say I understand the Germans.”¹⁷

That statement contained an ethical judgment that went much deeper than conventional moral evaluations, which assume that people are more-or-less in agreement about shared rights and responsibilities, even though they may violate those norms. For Levi, the Germans were not understandable because, as he put it, they had willingly abandoned civilization. Levi clarified these points in comments that he made in 1961 about collective guilt:

The very expression “collective guilt” is a contradiction in terms, and it is a Nazi invention. Every person is singly responsible for their actions. Every German (and non-German) who took part in the murdering is fully guilty; their accomplices are partially guilty . . . ; less guilty but still contemptible are the many who did nothing in the full knowledge of what was happening, and the mass who found ways of not knowing because of their hypocrisy or poverty of spirit.

In this way, we can build up a picture which belies the heroic inventions of Nazi propaganda: not collective guilt, but collective cowardice, a collective failure of intellectual courage, a collective foolishness and abandonment of civilization.¹⁸

Responsibility had to be assessed case by case, individual by individual, but when Levi took those steps, the accumulated judgments led him to see that moral reasoning could not comprehend Nazi Germany, at least not completely.

Levi's ethical analysis did not stop there. Acknowledging that he lacked trust in "the moral instinct of humanity, in mankind as 'naturally' good,"¹⁹ Levi warned that the existence of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust meant that realities akin to them could appear again—were even likely to do so—because no community had guaranteed immunity against them.²⁰ What could humankind do, he wondered, to keep such threats at bay?

One of Levi's responses was to study the gray zone and to grasp why there must be caution as well as boldness in making moral judgments. The existence of the *Sonderkommando*, for example, raised questions for those who wanted simple understanding: "Why did they accept that task? Why didn't they rebel? Why didn't they prefer death?"²¹ Historical inquiries, Levi emphasized, had done much to put such questions to rest. "Not all did accept," he rightly stated, "some did rebel, knowing they would die."²² As for those who went on to do the miserable work, Levi asserted that "no one is authorized to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not."²³

Levi did not find that imperative applicable to all prisoners in the Lager. Especially when the gray zone was under consideration, moral evaluations had to be made. Otherwise, important differences of power and privilege would be ignored, significant distinctions between individuals and their responsibilities overlooked. On the whole, however, Levi urged careful deliberation about any moral assessment of prisoner behavior, and he held that view for multiple reasons. First, quite apart from the Holocaust, it was illogical to think that ordinary men and women would behave like "saints and stoic philosophers."²⁴ If the Lager's realities were taken into account, Levi

thought that the prisoners' behavior could be called "rigidly preordained. In the space of a few weeks or months the deprivations to which they were subjected led them to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold, fatigue, and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero."²⁵ Levi strengthened his argument for caution about making moral judgments by adding two more reminders: "one is never in another's place," he emphasized, and "nobody can know for how long and under what trials his soul can resist before yielding or breaking."²⁶

Levi's position harbored danger, if not some inconsistency. While defending the Lager's victims against inappropriate moral judgments, would his appeal to human frailty and even to a kind of behavioral determinism open the door too widely for rationalizations that undermined the moral accountability he so much wanted to support? However unintentionally, was Levi handing the Holocaust's perpetrators and bystanders lines of reasoning that they could use to excuse themselves? To disarm the danger, Levi brought attention back to the pressurized structure of the gray zone. "Certainly," he argued, "the greatest responsibility lies with the system,"²⁷ but the system was neither abstract nor anonymous, and it was definitely not something that its victims had chosen or created, even though their entrapment meant that they would contribute to weaving its ensnaring web. Levi minced no words about German murderers and their accomplices, the experts at planning and implementing the "useless violence" that was rife in the Holocaust.²⁸ They were the ones who initiated, built, and maintained the system. Apart from them—from Hitler and Himmler to Muhsfeld—the system had no reality, but with them its degradation and killing went on and on.

Levi's ethics is instructive. By learning to restrain moral judgment appropriately, by not misdirecting it in ways that blame the victims, one can better focus where the ethical critique and its accompanying senses of moral obligation belong. Moral judgment should focus on the persons and decisions, the institutions and policies that created the Holocaust and every other form of genocide. Accompanying that judgment should be an intensification of responsibility to resist such people and to intervene against those circumstances, to honor those who do so, to embrace the survivors with compassion, to mourn and remember those who were murdered, and to restore—as far as possible—what was lost.

Levi's moral agenda is demanding. One reason, as he knew, is that restoring what the Holocaust took away is not only difficult but in many ways impossible. So when Levi asks what we can do to prevent further abandonment of civilization, he is aware that this work must be done in ruins where words such as *justice*, *religion*, *ethics*, and even *civilization* itself are deeply wounded, and not least because National Socialism co-opted them all. Nazism appealed to justice, used religion for its own ends, advanced its aims as ethical, and envisioned a new civilization even as it drew on science, technology, art, music, literature, and philosophy to attract its following. The creation of the *Sonderkommando*, we should remember, was a key part of that vast project. Levi's gray zone of Auschwitz, then, creates additional gray zones of the Holocaust and its aftermath, including the failure(s) of ethics, when we think about the meaning of such elemental concepts and developments. Study of the Holocaust's gray zones, suggests that no question is more important than how—or even whether—ethics can be restored and revitalized after Auschwitz.

Primo Levi was not sure that ethics could be restored and revitalized after Auschwitz, but he knew that the failure to try would exact a price higher than humankind could pay. That theme is illustrated in “News from the Sky,” an essay of Levi’s that appears in his book *Other People’s Trades*. There Levi notes that Immanuel Kant, the famous German philosopher, emphasized two wonders in creation: the starry sky above and the moral law within. “I don’t know about the moral law,” Levi muses, “does it dwell in everyone? . . . Every passing year augments our doubts.”²⁹ The starry sky seemed to be another matter, but even those considerations gave Levi pause. The stars remain, but the sky—the territory of bombers, hijacked planes, and missiles that can unleash terror and annihilation—has become an ominous place because of World War II, the Holocaust, 9/11, and their aftermath.

“The universe is strange to us, we are strange in the universe,” wrote Levi, and “the future of humanity is uncertain.”³⁰ Nevertheless, he had his hopes. “There are no problems that cannot be solved around a table,” Levi said, “provided there is good will and reciprocal trust.”³¹ It could be argued that this judgment of his was too optimistic. In any case, much hinges on his qualification about good will and reciprocal trust, for both remain in short supply. That scarcity is one of the most confounding results of the Holocaust’s gray zones and, I would add, the failure(s) of ethics.

The Holocaust did not have to happen. It emerged from human choices and decisions. Those facts mean that nothing human, natural, or divine guarantees respect for the ethical values and commitments that are most needed in contemporary human existence, but nothing is more important than our commitment to defend them, for they remain as fundamental as they are fragile, as precious as they are endangered.

Human experience and ethical dilemmas go hand in hand. As some problems are eliminated, new ones rise up or old ones reappear in different and even novel forms. Hunger, poverty, and crime, for example, are age-old, but their shape and size and the resources for dealing with them change with developments in politics, economics, technology, religion, and even ethics itself. Arguably critical ethical reflection would not exist—there would be no need for it—if human beings knew everything, understood all the consequences of their actions, never made mistakes, always agreed with one another about what to do, and put exactly the right policies into practice. Human experience, however, is not that clear or simple. Our knowledge is incomplete. We do make mistakes; we do disagree. Often, human life is full of conflict because we do not see eye to eye about what is true and right. Thus, human life simmers, boils, and at times erupts in controversies, debates, and disputes. All too often, issues intensify and escalate into violence, war, and even genocide.

Fortunately, those destructive responses are not the only ones that human beings can make. Ethical reflection may prove insufficient to save the day; nevertheless it remains crucial, and it is ignored at our peril. Done well, ethical thinking, in spite of its failure(s) can focus a community's attention helpfully and stimulate constructive activity—education, cooperation, better understanding, caring, and beneficial political and economic action. Ethics may not be enough, but failures and all, it is still the best compass we have. It may be what the American poet William Stafford called a “forlorn cause,” but if we human beings are going to exist at our best, the cause of ethics must be and will be ours. The Holocaust and its reverberations, I believe, bear witness to that.

Notes

1. For more detail about my focus on these themes, see John K. Roth, *Ethics During and After the Holocaust: In the Shadow of Birkenau* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Parts of the first half of this essay are adapted from that book.
2. This paragraph draws on my discussion of Raul Hilberg's ethics in *Ethics During and After the Holocaust*, pp. 54-74, and especially p.70.
3. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 123. From his hiding place in Dresden, the German Jewish scholar Victor Klemperer documented how the Nazis themselves had contributed to a new, harsh language of violence and atrocity. See Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich (LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii): A Philologist's Notebook*, trans. Martin Brady (New York: Continuum, 2002).
4. See, for instance, Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), pp. 67-129. Choiceless choices, writes Langer, do not “reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing” (p. 72).
5. See Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

6. See Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944).
7. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 53.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
9. *Ibid.*, 82.
10. Primo Levi, "The Duty of Memory," in Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, eds., *The Voice of Memory: Interviews, 1961-1987*, trans. Robert Gordon (New York: The New Press, 2001), p. 232. This article is based on Levi's interview Anna Bravo and Federico Cereja, which was first published in Italy in 1983.
11. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 48.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 69.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

18. Levi, *The Voice of Memory*, pp. 180-81.
19. Ibid., p. 180.
20. See Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 199.
21. Ibid., p. 58.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 59.
24. Ibid., p. 49.
25. Ibid., pp. 49-50.
26. Ibid., p. 60.
27. Ibid., p. 44.
28. See Levi's chapter on "Useless Violence" in *The Drowned and the Saved*, pp. 105-26.
29. Primo Levi, *Other People's Trades*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1989), p. 20.
30. Ibid., pp. 22-23.
31. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 200.