

ON VICTIMHOOD*

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Coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of
having been diminished.

Primo Levi¹

Abstract.

A challenging theme for reflection after the Holocaust is victimhood. There is a presumed but rather unexplored connection between victimhood and intrinsic evil. This essay wants to contribute to the clarification of the concept of being a victim, with special regard to intrinsic evil. Current notions turn out to be impregnated with religious, legalistic and moralistic connotations that express non-victim perspectives. The essay proposes that the concept of being a victim should be interpreted from a victim perspective, which would yield a concept that makes victimhood a possibly universal intrinsic evil. Such a concept, it is suggested, should focus on severe injury in combination with drastically reduced agency in respect to the injury in question.

The hell of victimhood.

Since Auschwitz is a major symbol of evil and Holocaust historiography typically characterizes the participants in that sequence of events as perpetrators, bystanders, or victims,² there is an important connection in contemporary mind between the concept evil and, in particular, the roles of perpetrator and victim. Roughly, whereas perpetrators are the agents or instruments of evil, victims are those who undergo evil, who experience a state that is evil in itself. Moral philosophers, as well as historians, have largely focussed on the former rather than on the latter. But victimhood is central to how intrinsic evil is to be understood. The notion of being a victim, however, is rather unclear. This essay wants to contribute to a clarification and reconstruction of this concept, with special regard to intrinsic evil.

* I thank Jan Robbins for good work on my English.

¹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 56.

² See Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators victims bystanders – the Jewish catastrophe, 1933-1945*, and Christopher R. Browning, 'German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, and Historical Reconstruction: Writing Perpetrator History from Post-war Testimony', pp. 25f.

Perpetrators of evil are frightening, but their victims are also frightening. If they are alive at all they are seldom clean, tidy and unmarked: with gaping mouths, distorted expressions, terrified faces and damaged bodies they hunch and drag themselves along – people who not long ago talked, laughed and behaved with dignity. Yet, frightening as they may be, victims seem irresistibly to attract our attention. Perhaps it is so just because *they* constitute such a convincing picture of what *we* neither are nor intend to become – a picture of what we constantly strive to insure our wellbeing against.

Though few empirical studies have been made, victimhood can plausibly be assumed to be considered an intrinsic evil in all, or most, moralities, and its extreme forms are commonly seen as making up hell.³ Numerous testimonies from, for instance, the Nazi concentration and death camps use such terms. At the same time, hellish victimhood has provided rich nourishment for evil imaginations. One author, George Steiner, maintains that the death camps of the Nazis and the communists are nothing less than a demonic staging of the ancient visions of hell that the West has inherited.⁴

The notion of victimhood carries the sinister imagery mentioned, but it also carries other things besides. During ancient times and the Middle Ages, priests would conjure up images of hell and its denizens to keep their parishioners on the paths of faith and virtue; hell was after all one aspect of a divine order that afflicted unworthy sinners. The situation, however, is paradoxical. There is also in our culture a considerable heroicization of victims, making them possible to use for ideological and political causes. The idea of extinction and the rise of a new, higher form of life is found in many faiths. Christianity takes its idol – Jesus – in the most extreme of victim situations – crucifixion – to be its symbol, and suffering for the sake of Jesus has been seen as an entry ticket to a better world. The state of victimhood would be a purgatory for heaven.

This essay proposes a more modest purification, namely of the concept of being a victim. My ambition is not the result of an essentialist purism but of the recognition that the language we use affects our thinking and our attitudes. There is, for instance, often (perhaps always) a moral content in historical narratives, like in the narrative of the Holocaust, and value-loaded traits in the roles of the story will tend to color not only our view of the past but also how

³ For an interesting empirical study of how people experience evil, see C. Fred Alford, *What Evil Means to Us*. “Evil”, writes Alford, “has its origins in nothingness because it is a no-thing: the dread of boundlessness and all that goes with it – loss of self, loss of meaning, loss of history, and loss of connection to the world itself” (p. ix).

⁴ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*. Seen in this light, the attention we pay to the Holocaust gives reason for apprehension as much as hope for the future, by passing on to every Tom, Dick, and Harry an updated, detailed picture of hell.

we prepare for the future. We should therefore take a moral stand, at least in important cases, in our conceptual choices.

I suggest that we eliminate such characteristics in the concept of being a victim that retract from, or do not add to, delimiting the scope of the concept to instances of possibly universal intrinsic evil. One way of approaching this, I think, would be to adopt a *victim perspective* when giving the definitional characteristics in question. A victim perspective would require that these be focussed on states lived by an obvious reference class of victims, and that the concept of them would in principle be acceptable to the large majority of those they are to apply to.

Let me begin with a critical scrutiny of current and influential uses of the term ‘victim’. When I probe the aptness of various conceptual contents I will continue to use examples taken from the Nazi evil, and as the obvious reference class of victims I shall use those imprisoned and possibly killed in the Nazi concentration and death camps.

Victim as a religious–sacrificial notion.

In English, German, French, and most other languages the words used of the people that suffered in the Nazi concentration and death camps reverberate with religious thought and ceremony. In the etymology of ‘victim’ one finds, according to *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, the Sanskrit ‘vinakti’ meaning ‘to set apart’, ‘to single out’, the old English ‘wih’, ‘weoh’ and ‘wig’ meaning ‘holy’, the old high German ‘wih’, ‘wihi’ and the Gothic ‘weihs’ also meaning ‘holy’, the old Norse ‘ve’ meaning ‘temple’. The dictionary renders as its first, and original, meaning ‘a living being sacrificed to some deity or in the performance of a religious rite’. The original meaning of ‘victimization’ is consequently:

1.a: to make a victim of: SACRIFICE [...] **b:** to slaughter as a sacrificial victim.⁵

The Oxford English Dictionary has roughly the same original meaning of ‘victim’:

1.a: A living creature killed or offered as a sacrifice to some deity or supernatural power [...] **b.** Applied to Christ as an offering for mankind.⁶

The religious-sacrificial meaning is found also in, for instance, the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, but there rendered as the third and fourth

⁵ *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* – here shortened *WTNID*, p. 2550.

⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. – here shortened *OED*, vol. XIX, p. 607.

definition (contemporary senses are put before the original senses). The third definition is ‘a person or animal sacrificed or regarded as sacrificed’ and the fourth sense is ‘a living creature sacrificed in religious rites’.⁷ War victims exemplify persons ‘regarded as sacrificed’, indicating that at least in wars where the cause is similar to the demand of a deity those killed are considered to be victims. If a range of nationalist causes were accepted, then the third sense would transcend the religious-sacrificial.

The same religious-sacrificial background also colors the term that is commonly used as a collective name for the Nazi crimes against humanity: ‘the Holocaust’, taken from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, meaning approximately ‘extensive (burnt) offering’. It has recently been questioned if the religious-sacrificial meaning of this term really is as dominant as is often assumed.⁸ But the fact that both terms with their original religious-sacrificial content typically occur together, thus structuring the context for each other, makes them strengthen each other in this respect. To talk about the victims of the Holocaust, therefore, risk influencing our thinking about the events in a religious-sacrificial direction.

In many cultures human beings on special occasions, under special arrangements, have offered objects, crops, animals and sometimes persons to an imagined deity in an act of entreaty, invocation or gratitude. It is part of a way of thinking and behaving that enjoys a certain respect, even if one does not share the religious beliefs in question: one ‘understands’ these acts in a sense that includes a weak acceptance (or at least not unequivocal condemnation). Human sacrifice is thus in a different ethical category from homicide or robbery with murder. One reason for this is that the concept of sacrifice implies both a noble spiritual striving and a high social purpose such as a good harvest, or some other benefit to the whole community. Another reason is that the act of brutality has its origin in a divine belief, which is generally felt to be something of moral dignity. A further reason is that the act of sacrifice is not at all in the nature of a personal choice; it appears to be something inevitable as a unique means of communication with the deity, or as the execution of a divine command. The individuals concerned would have no personal guilt with regard to the consequences.

The trouble with speaking of ‘victims’ and ‘the Holocaust’ in connection with the Nazis’ systematic murder of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and disabled people is that these words conjure up an idea of acts that can be referred to and

⁷ *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed. – here shortened *RHUD*, p. 2119.

⁸ See Jon Petrie, ‘The secular word HOLOCAUST: scholarly myths, history, and 20th century meanings’.

understood as part of an archaic pattern: the taking of life as a noble, even divine, duty in the performance of which the individual has no real choice, but is blameless and retains moral integrity.⁹ It is actually to the Nazis' benefit, placing them outside the category of criminals and inside that of priesthood. This is also the case if one plays with the confused idea of the Holocaust as a sacrifice related to the Jewish people's claim on the Holy Land. This interpretation seems to be represented by the Zionist movement, and has been adopted by Israel as something of a national myth. It not only means that Jehovah would be an appallingly cruel god, but also implies that Jehovah made use of the Nazi butchers to carry out the necessary sacrifice, making of them, as it were, an involuntary Jewish priesthood.

From a descriptive angle one would not be too far off, however. The leading Nazis did regard the annihilation of Jews and others as a sacred duty; Nazism was in many respects something of a religion, with Hitler as savior. What Hitler would save was the German people and the Aryan race, through the creation of a Third Reich aiming at a higher, purer humanity.¹⁰ In his speech to the innermost SS circle on October 4, 1943 in Posen, Himmler described the killing thus: "All in all, we can say that we have fulfilled this extremely difficult duty out of love for our people, and we have sustained no injury in our innermost being, our soul, our character."¹¹ The SS leadership is here seen as a priesthood, and the true victims, in Himmler's view, were the Germans who were sent to their deaths or subjected to other horrors – having to murder Jews, for instance – so that Hitler's high duty might be fulfilled. The soldiers also received a ceremonial blessing, and the corpses that many of them became were granted official honors.

Those whom *we* (today) consider the victims of the Holocaust were not so for the Nazis, who did everything they could to diminish the value of them, stripped them of all personal attributes, replaced names with numbers, demonstrated in every way that they were non-people. They were regarded as poison and pollution, filth that should be expelled from the body of society – and filth is not something to offer to a deity. An aspect of genuine sacrifices is that something *valuable* is offered. The object or person to be sacrificed is decorated, honored, blessed, and the act itself is performed with great solemnity and formality. Instead, the Nazis' actions constituted what one author has described the as 'the excremental assault' on unworthy people: the death camps

⁹ As Michael Berenbaum, in *The World Must Know*, cautiously puts it, "The word itself ['the Holocaust'] softens and falsifies the event by giving it a religious significance" (p. 1).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Michael Burleigh, *Ethics and Extermination*.

¹¹ A recording of this speech reposes in the National Archives in Washington, USA.

were to be the sewers of the world.¹²

Some of those killed by the Nazis would perhaps not object to being described as victim in the religious-sacrificial sense. Their right to do so should not be questioned. What can be questioned, however, is *our* right to describe all that were tortured and killed as victims in this sense, since we then regard and judge their suffering and death from an outside perspective, representing them as *means* for the achievement of a divine goal. A different, religiously neutral concept of victimhood, however, seems to be in use as well. Also inmates in the death camps who in principle would not mind to be regarded as victims in the religious-sacrificial sense would probably not mind being called victims even though the proper ceremonial setting for their suffering and death were lacking.

Legalistic and moralistic concepts of victimhood.

Several non religious-sacrificial concepts of victimhood are applicable to, for instance, the inhabitants of the concentration and death camps. The expounding of 'victim' in the *OED* continues thus:

- 2.a:** A person who is put to death or subjected to torture by another; one who suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive treatment [...] **b.** One who is reduced or destined to suffer under some oppressive or destructive agency [...] **c.** One who perishes or suffers in health, etc., from some enterprise or pursuit voluntarily undertaken.

In the *WTNID* three definitions that are not religious-sacrificial are given:

- 2:** Someone put to death, tortured, or mulcted by another: a person subjected to oppression, deprivation, or suffering <a ~ of war> <a ~ of intolerance> <fell ~ to prohibition era gangsters> **3:** someone who suffers death, loss or injury in an undertaking of his own <became a ~ of his own ambition> **4:** someone tricked, duped, or subjected to hardship: someone badly used or taken advantage of [...].

The *RHUD* has the following as the first and second definitions:

- 1.a:** A person who suffers from a destructive or injurious action of agency: *a victim of an automobile accident.* **2.** A person who is deceived or cheated, as by his or her own emotions or ignorance, by the dishonesty of others, or by some impersonal agency: *a victim of misplaced confidence; the victim of a swindler; a victim of an optical illusion.*

¹² Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor, an Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, ch. 3.

A core meaning in all these definitions is that a victim is inflicted some kind of rather severe injury in a broad sense, but when it comes to a closer description of the injury in question and its circumstances, the different concepts seem to be construed with separate focuses. These can be more clearly discerned when the term forming an opposite to 'victim' is considered. To begin with, victims are often contrasted with *survivors*. The focus in question is the injury of death. This seems unnecessarily narrow for a usable concept of being a victim; also those who survived oppression and torture should reasonably be seen as having been victims.

Victims are often more widely contrasted with those who *escaped* the horrors experienced by the victims. The focus would then be on the very occurrence of things that are rather strongly against a person's desire, will or interests, typically meaning suffering and perhaps death for them – on severe injury, in short. This, the *severe injury condition*, I take to be a necessary but not sufficient condition in a usable concept of being a victim.

Still another focus is that a person is subjected to a severe injury by another person. The victim is thus opposed to the *perpetrator*. Victim is someone who suffers severe injury without having been its instigator. Let me call this ingredient the *non-causing condition* on being a victim. Should it be necessary in a concept that adopts the victim perspective? The standard answer would probably be 'yes', but I think it is due to an oversimplification of the matter.

As is evident from *OED 2.b.* and *RHUD 1.a.* and **2** dead objects in non-intended events has been taken to cause victims. The agency, it is said in *RHUD 2*, may be impersonal. One may speak of, for instance, the victims of an earthquake. But in many cases of impersonal agency human intentionality still plays a part, as in the automobile example, where someone must have been driving the car, perhaps carelessly but without wishing an accident to happen. Intentionality may also work from a distance in space and time as when, for instance, people are victimized by a tornado or a flood due to distant human interventions that have disturbed the climate.

It would be odd to call an earthquake a perpetrator, so if victim requires perpetrator it would be natural to demand that the causing of the severe injury of the victim is somehow intentional. But it is unfortunately not clear what kind and degree of non-causing it would take to be a victim, and what kind and degree of causing it would take to be a perpetrator, and his obscurity blurs the border between victim and perpetrator. Is the merely careless driver a perpetrator? Can a person that has participated in climate-disturbing interventions still be a victim of a resulting tornado?

We tend to think of perpetrator and victim as separate persons, just as we

tend to think of people as either good or bad. A certain confusion would be dissolved if the concepts of victim and perpetrator were relativized to events or states, so that a person may be a victim relative to an event or a state, A, and a perpetrator relative to another event or state, B. But what if the event or state is the same? According to *OED 2.c.* and *WTNID 3* the agent of an injury may be the same person as the one afflicted, since the injury of a person can be the result of an enterprise or pursuit s/he has undertaken voluntarily (but, let us assume, without a wish of the result – one would not say that a person fell victim to her suicide). The injury can even be the result of the victim's emotions or ignorance, according to *RHUD 2*. It may be caused by, for instance, a not fully conscious repression of certain interests, or a certain aspect of the personality (as exemplified by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno¹³). Did, then, Albert Speer become a victim of his blinding devotion to the Führer, which caused his eventual misery? Were Hitler and the German warmongers victims of the German disaster, or the perpetrators of it, or perhaps both? They suffered a defeat they never intended but knew was a theoretical risk with their undertakings, a risk they underestimated intoxicated as they were by initial triumphs.

One could respond that at least Hitler and the SS élite were clear-cut perpetrators of the Holocaust, since they wanted it to happen. In a sense they did, but it seems that extensive killings was not what they wished but rather the geographical disappearance of the Jews and other harmful or inferior people, which in its turn was believed to be necessary to what they really wanted: a strong Germany and a healthy, dominant Aryan race.¹⁴ Of course, they made the ultimate killing decisions. But what, then, about SS men and others at lower levels who had no part in the choice made by the leadership, but participated in the killings out of ignorance, blind hate, fear of the war at the front, or pure authoritarianism – were they rather victims?

If one turns to the other party of the drama the non-causing condition creates problems also. Are Jews murdered in the death camps to describe as instigators of their death, since before being sent to the camps they continued to live as usual, despite the knowledge that this was provoking the Nazis who wished to get rid of them? Were the Jews that chose to be Kapos, or that otherwise assisted

¹³ In *Dialektik der Aufklärung* they describe Ulysses in such terms, see for instance p. 52.

¹⁴ The Nazis first thought that a *judenfrei* Germany could be achieved by a forced emigration of Jews. At an early stage a Jewish territory was planned in central Poland. Later the French colony Madagaskar appears to be a possible location for them. Adolf Eichman spent a year working on the Madagaskar project. See Karl A. Schleuner, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*, and Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*.

in the total process of the killings, or that competed successfully for bread with weaker co-prisoners, and hence made causal contributions to the Holocaust, to regard as perpetrators? Did the resistance fighter become a perpetrator, when s/he managed to exchange the name of an important co-fighter for the name of someone less important on a list of selections for the gas chambers?

All these possibilities, I think, would upset the intuitions of many regarding the sensible use of the term 'victim', which indicates that the non-causing condition as such hardly would be acceptable to, for instance, the inhabitants of the death camps. Most of them would surely want to be regarded as victims even if they gave causal contributions to the Holocaust.

A concept of being a victim that is focused on the non-causing role of the victim would seem to have its principal significance for the apportioning of legal responsibility. The administration of justice punishes those who on purpose, or against what they ought to know, injure someone. The concept has its uses, for instance, in insurance cases where claims for compensation have to be assessed. It may be useful for the description of instrumental evil and good also, but I do not think that it is appropriate for the identification of a possibly universal intrinsic evil. The latter, I think, would not be connected to facts about the causal contributions to the injury, but to other aspects of being injured.

The popularity of the non-causing condition may depend on an assumed connection between it and an understated condition, namely that a person who suffers injury should be termed 'victim' only if s/he is morally innocent or blameless in regard to the injury. Let me call this the *innocence condition*. The general idea is that there often is a burden of moral guilt in relation to injuries, which typically (but not necessarily) is linked to the causal agent of the injury. The opposite of the victim is the *justly injured*, for instance the attacked enemy or the imprisoned felon. Many people would not, on such a condition, consider Hitler or Speer to be victims since they were morally responsible for their own suffering. A Jewish Kapo, or a member of a *Sonderkommando*, on the other hand, even though causally contributing to the Holocaust, would often be considered morally blameless because they acted under force.

But the innocence condition is problematic. It was, for instance, employed by the leading Nazis, and to them the situation was quite the reverse. They pleaded Jewish moral guilt in order to absolve themselves of the burden for the persecution and extermination of the Jews, arguing that it was the Jews' loathsome genetic characteristics, their long-established, collective criminality and their contamination of the Germanic race that forced the Nazis into such

destructive behavior.¹⁵ Through their guilt the Jews were seen as the ones morally responsible for their extermination. The German people was threatened to become victims of Jewish corruption and decay, and ‘the final solution’ was viewed as a sort of unavoidable prophylactic annihilation of evil agencies, according to this view. Unfortunately, the term ‘Shoa’ used for this annihilation works in the same direction, since it has a connotation that the disaster is somehow deserved because of sins committed.¹⁶

This absurd idea must of course be refuted. Should we instead maintain, using the innocence condition, that for instance the Jews are the victims of the Holocaust by virtue of their actual blamelessness? A judgement of who is victim and who is perpetrator cannot be made on the basis of facts alone, according to this condition, ethics must enter the picture. But can we hope to objectively prove our case on this ground? The identification of the victims risks to end in a marsh of ethical disputes. It must be owned that there was a Nazi ethic. Their ultimate objective seems to have been a pure, harmonious and advanced world of human beings, to be brought about by the ‘Aryans’. This goal was combined with a simultaneous total ruthlessness about the means of achieving it: the end justified the means. There are similarities here to Communist ideology. Embarrassingly enough, both ideologies could be taken as rough, historicist versions of a teleological thinking with deep roots in Western tradition. It borders to utilitarianism, so common among moral philosophers, which does not work with the idea of an inviolable human value and associates moral blame with the causing of negative consequences for mankind.¹⁷ The major difference is that a non-Nazi utilitarian would judge the facts in the case differently, and would lack the sweeping view of history. But should the wrongness of the Nazi measures depend only on mistaken facts, inaccurate observations and probability estimates?

¹⁵ Hitler puts it as follows in his testament of April 2nd, 1945: “Battered, left alone to work out its own salvation, existing solely as a custodian during the grim darkness of the night, the German people must strive its very utmost spontaneously to respect those racial laws which we laid down for it. In a world which is becoming more and more perverted through the Jewish virus, a people which has remained immune to the virus must in the long run emerge supreme. From this point of view, National Socialism can justly claim the eternal gratitude of the people for having eliminated the Jew from Germany and Central Europe.” *The Testament of Adolf Hitler*, p. 105.

¹⁶ Debra Berghofen, ‘Improper Sites’, p. 28. See also Berel Lang’s analysis in *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*.

¹⁷ Michael Burleigh, in *Death and Deliverance: ‘Euthanasia’ in Germany 1900-1945*, discusses how rough utilitarian points of view, in combination with redefinitions of personhood and analogies between non-humans and some humans, contributed to the brutal Nazi practice.

According to a utilitarian it may be right to kill innocent people, if a good result is in view. Many oppose this line of argument. Is the Nazi defense of the Holocaust more acceptable, that people believed to be morally guilty can be exterminated for a happier future? A concept of being a victim rooted in a combination of severe injury and moral innocence actually seems to be shaped to fit an ethical principle saying that harming or killing people is wrong only if those affected are morally innocent. The reverse of this principle is that harming or killing can be right if those affected are morally guilty. This aspect of the principle, together with the idea that Jews and others were vicious, is the core of the Nazi defense.

It should be noted that countless opponents of Nazi Germany basically used the same principle when they considered that the German people, by supporting Hitler and his war, deserved the Allies' carpet-bombing at the end of the war. In fact, the Nazi principle receives a good deal of support in everyday ethics. How many have not deplored that the Nazi victims did not violently oppose their evil butchers? How many action films from the great democracy in the West cannot be found where the heroes' annihilation of bad guys and loathsome creeps is presented as morally justified (echoing the State's practice of capital punishment)?

To take the paradox further, it can be noted that this principle is not of Christian origin but is rather a constituent of Jewish tradition, namely the Old Testament's law of 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', and its idea of a just hell for unworthy sinners. In the eyes of Jesus in the New Testament people are to be loved regardless of their virtues and vices, and there is no moral desert for suffering and death. Today many Jews and other humanists embrace such Christian views also. Therefore I do not think that the innocence condition is acceptable from a victim perspective. The innocence condition may be useful for descriptions of instrumental evil and good, but it is doubtful that it would be appropriate for the identification of a possibly universal intrinsic evil.

Victimhood as impotence with regard to severe injury.

From a victim perspective, then, we would need a concept of being a victim that is unrelated to either causation or moral guilt, which instead focuses on states that are lived by victims. It seems insufficient to classify all severely injured as victims. What more is needed? I think there is a hidden trait in many of the definitions offered by the dictionaries that once made explicit would serve. It is that victim situations typically are marked by impotence.

According to a suggested *impotence condition* a victim is someone who is helpless and cannot but succumb to an injurious event or state. The opposite

of the victim in this sense would be the injured that is *subject-in-her/his-life*. A concept of being a victim with the impotence condition is, I think, evident in everyday language when, for instance, women are exhorted to ‘stop being a victim’ in a marriage where they are abused and beaten – they should instead take control of their life and break out of the bad situation. The mentions in the dictionaries of victims as ‘subjected to’ or ‘reduced or destined to’ their injury may testify to the impotence condition. As for the death camp example, suppose it had been possible (grotesque thought) for the prisoners to easily leave the camp for a good life, then we would hesitate to describe those that stayed as ‘victims’. This reaction could be explained by the use of a concept of being a victim discussed earlier – that those who stayed were seen as instigators of their fate. But that would, I believe, be secondary to the principal explanation, namely that they were not impotent in regard to their injurious situation.

I think of impotence not so much in regard to the incidence of an injury (misfortunes happen!) as to the prospect of canceling it or overcoming the negative consequences of it. The case is about causal power, one could say, and this mainly with a view to the present and the future. The lack of causal power, in the impotence condition on being a victim, is not general but only relative to a given injury and its negative effects.

One may distinguish between an autonomy aspect and an integrity aspect of impotence as a mark of victimhood. The *autonomy aspect* would be that a person is prevented from exercising her/his will, depending on internal or external circumstances that stop her/him from shaping what happens to her/him. If a person’s will in regard to an injurious event or situation, or its negative consequences, has become ineffectual, then her/his autonomy in this respect has been cancelled out; such a person could be called an *autonomy victim*. Being an autonomy victim is, I think, a candidate for a universal intrinsic evil.

The *integrity aspect* goes deeper, it would be that a person’s personality, thought and will do not function normally in the injury situation. S/he no longer ‘owns’ her/his mind and decisions but functions in a reduced, unfamiliar and possibly self-destructive way. When a person’s integrity is distorted and reduced in regard to an injury situation the individual could be called an *integrity victim*. To be that is also a candidate for a universal intrinsic evil. The strongest candidate, of course, is when a person is both autonomy and integrity victim. Most of those we call victims are, or become, so in both aspects, since being an autonomy victim often affects the integrity. But there are people, for instance Socrates, who remain intact subjects-in-their-life even in their forced death.

The Nazi extermination and labor camps provide material for the study of most forms and degrees of autonomy and integrity victimhood and their

interaction. A person's very entry into the concentration camp usually entailed a moral collapse. The victims were deprived consistently of their surroundings, their personal belongings and attributes, and were driven like cattle, without any visible means of escaping their fate. Numerous survivors have testified to feeling that they were transformed into an 'animal', or a 'ghost', or a '(mentally) dead', or 'a hollow man'. As Primo Levi, author and ex-prisoner of Auschwitz, puts it, "it deals with the death of the soul".¹⁸

Levi called the result of the process a 'transplantation trauma'. Its most severe form was seen in "the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose depositions would have general significance" – 'the Muslims', as those afflicted by complete apathy were called.¹⁹ But a considerable number of prisoners managed to pass through the trauma and establish a sort of dissonant *modus vivendi* where earlier values and attitudes were largely abandoned or suppressed. The author Jean Améry, also an ex-prisoner of Auschwitz, described it as follows:

In the camp the intellect in its totality declared itself to be incompetent. As a tool for solving the tasks put to us it admitted defeat. However, and this is a very essential point, it could be used for its *own abolition*, and that in itself was something [...] only rarely did thinking grant itself a respite. But it nullified itself when at almost every step it ran into its uncrossable borders. The axes of its traditional frames of reference then shattered. Beauty: that was an illusion. Knowledge: that turned out to be a game with ideas. Death veiled itself in all its inscrutability.²⁰

Through this adaptation, what previously had been the personality thus became diminished, transformed, at least temporarily. Those personal characteristics most highly valued in normal life by, for instance, a sensitive intellectual like Jean Améry became under death camp conditions not merely superfluous equipment, but a direct threat to survival, since intellectuals were favorite targets for the lowest rank of camp executioners.

The new personality substituted a basic survival instinct for considered choice, sympathy and/or altruistic principles, which we usually regard as constituents of our morality. The permanent situation as degraded autonomy victims gradually turned people into integrity victims. Singularly enough, some managed nevertheless to retain their genuine, moral personality, made it survive in secret and at least occasionally show itself. Survivors like Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Jean Améry were not broken down either, or at least not

¹⁸ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁰ Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limit*, p. 19.

catastrophically and not irretrievably.²¹ There are even instances of people who under these circumstances stand out as moral agents acting with a potency seldom encountered in daily life – heroic, saintly people.²²

Victimhood, in the suggested sense, is thus a complex and relative state, it concerns several aspects of our capability of acting and living, and it exists in regard to some injury and some circumstances. A person may be a victim in regard to one injury but not to another, and not to other aspects of her/his life. The seemingly capable citizen may at the same time be a victim – in regard to a perhaps not apparent injury. The energy developed in the former role may be an attempt to overcome the helplessness and suffering in the latter.

It can plausibly be assumed that experiences of victimhood risk giving rise to acts of instrumental evil. C. Fred Alford has accordingly suggested that sadism is “the joy of having taken control of the experience of victimhood by inflicting it upon another”.²³ Suffered destructiveness may also turn back on a victim. In *The Accident*, the third part of the trilogy that begins with the Auschwitz-portrait *Night*, Elie Wiesel describes how many years later a survivor of Auschwitz is so affected by the pain of his humiliation that he allows himself to be run over by a car. An understanding of the complexities of victimhood may therefore contribute to our understanding of both intrinsic and instrumental evil.

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²¹ For a discussion of the ethics of victimhood, see my essay ‘Morality of the Light, Morality of the Dark: Reflections on Ethics and the Holocaust’.

²² There are several examples of this in, e.g., Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme, Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*. Olga Lengyel gives a powerful description of moral integrity in her book of memoirs, *Five Chimneys*. Primo Levi describes ‘moral survivors’ principally in *The Drowned and the Saved*.

²³ Alford, *ibid.*, p. 28.

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