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NOTHING TO DO OR THE INVISIBLE ETHICS

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Abstract: According to Fondane, rationalist philosophy implies arguments that aim at a separation of the intelligible and the sensible which, in the Platonic tradition represents a degradation of the de-signified individual. Supporting itself on Lévinas' thematization of the ethical as a prime philosophy, the interpretation regards the nucleus of the strong relation between morality and religion. Following the Christic example, the moment man is emptied of himself, he may free himself from his fake central placing. A radical passivity of a de-moralized conscience that, having nothing to do, gives itself to the Good from before its possibility of choosing it. A humiliated ethics, invisible to transcendence, in the light of which it is not primordial to do something good, but to let oneself be made by the immemorial Good.

Key words: existential philosophy, Platonic tradition, ethics, transcendent, de-moralized conscience, Good, religion, de-creation.

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“One must fight with all reason against someone who would struggle to annihilate knowledge, wisdom, and intellect by any means”¹. The text that B. Fondane proposes as an answer to the survey began by “Cahiers du Sud”² is structured around - and against - this position. To proclaim the stringent fight against somebody who attacks the ontological precedence of knowledge and that of the intellect - as Plato does and, after him, an entire tradition of the Western philosophical thought - equates with the desperate attempt to save the purity of the intelligible and to shelter it from any infection coming from the sensible. According to this hierarchical vision, the superior (the intelligible) should be separated from the inferior (the sensible). If the place of the intelligible is the correlation between knowledge and being (in Parmenidian terms: thinking is equal to being), the thought that is its expression does not function meaningfully unless it is separated from the sensible, isolated in a proud single cell. “The wise - writes Aristotle - can still dedicate himself to contemplation, event left alone with himself”³, as the body is a chimera, adds Descartes, and “what is called feeling in me ... is nothing but thought”⁴. Faced with the possible insurrection of the body and of the sensible in general, and in order to surpass the possible nefarious consequences of such a logical dead end, (clear and distinct) rationalist philosophy uses the most subtle arguments, according to which -writes Fondane - “what happens must be understood not only in its relation to itself, but to the whole as well; the world has more rights to become the owner of Providence than the people; through his thought, man has to reach such a level of generality so as to feel indifference towards his own existence; evil is necessary to Good, even if only opposed to it; evil does not exist, it is an exclusive act, an absence”. There follows an equal number of degrees of degradation and marginalization of the individual without significance; not as much its elimination, but its absorption into a category considered superior, which would immunize its meaning, would pull out its nefarious thorn and would integrate it into a realm where it would lose touch with the ground. It is the reverse of a metonymic act, for here it is not the part that stands for the whole; the whole does not recognize the part unless it is integrated in its assimilating order and never in its partiality that cannot be interchangeable. It is a huge organism seen as *individuum* that rejects prohibitively any *dividuum*. Talking about the parts of the universal body, Plotinus writes that “some die because they cannot stand the order of the universe, just like a turtle caught in the middle of a grand procession that moves rhythmically and who suffers because it cannot escape the rhythm of the choir but if it coordinated its movements, it would no longer suffer from it”⁵. Thus - Fondane continues commenting on this fragment - “the responsibility of the intelligible world is exceptionally saved; the Laws cannot dance but according to perfection and cannot care about anything else; anything else, that is history, the anonymous crowd of turtles, stepped on by the dancers’ feet”. May history and the body be stepped on

by the laws of general order, indifferent to *what happens* to man's order? Philosophy perpetuates inevitably the old conflict "between the sensible that cannot manifest itself without a body ... and Aristotle's *intellectus separatus*"⁶. If the sensible has to appear in a body in order to feel and to be felt, the intelligible defines itself through the break from corporality as from an alternative that is subject to alteration; a passive body thought – assimilated – by an active intellect that recognizes it by rejecting its individual. Hence, knowledge belongs to the intellect that comes out of the passivity of the sensible that surpasses it in idea, transferring the individual into the universal. „Once recognized, writes E. Lévinas, the individual is already deprived of its sensibility and reported, in intuition, to the universal”⁷. The conceptualized sensible is no longer proximity, a wound of someone who feels, but it is contained by knowledge and re-felt intelligibly. Interpreted as starting from knowledge, the sensible (by extension: the horizon of sensitivity) loses its corporality and it becomes a re-presentative image, a reflection of the truth. In order to escape this aporia and to remain in an intact contact with sensitivity (together with subjectivity tied to corporality)⁸, the sensible must be withdrawn from the adventure of knowledge⁹. But intellectual knowledge operates by separating itself from the sensible that, it faces by making it objective on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in a second phase, that it absorbs in the already-known reduced to an abstract relic. What was once treated separately is now united; the menacing contradiction is annihilated by thematization. What seems without understanding, regarding the humanity of the flesh and blood (that is, the way in which a body is animated by thought) is “nonsense according to the system intelligibility, where animation is understood only in terms of uniting and coupling”¹⁰. “From the point of view of the intelligible – writes Fondane – there is but one way of winning: to remind itself that it is separated: the only thing man can do is to untie himself from this sensibility that cannot manifest itself without a body, to become indifferent to history and to limit himself to perfecting his own self, to guide it towards renouncing, that is, towards annihilating the contradiction”.

But the body of the sensible is the body embodied in a soul, an intimate rapport that cannot be thematized or united by synthesis. If it is thematized or synthesized, what shows itself to thought as a theme or synthesis is, for the intelligible, the betrayed sensible, “the unintelligibility of the embodiment, « I think » separated from the extent, the *cogito* separated from the body”¹¹. An illegitimate separation, which is nothing but the trace of a separation as interiority, where identity, in order to have meaning, constructs itself “by dismissing itself, a separation that is the embodiment of the subject or the very possibility to give, to make a gift of *significance*”¹². Could we really donate (anything) if we let ourselves in the hands of a disembodied (and, in this respect, manipulative) intellect, separated from the body and, thus, incapable of

dismissing itself? An intellect is not only without a body, it is without a soul as well, a cogito whose radical reduction undermines it exactly in its possibility to mean. It is not the body as such that is unintelligible for such a *cogito*, but the embodiment, negating the separation, the maculation by approaching the other. Only the dismissed subject, expelled from itself, which gives itself in its own disavowing, is able to give and donate, to confess itself as vulnerable and exposed. We cannot give away our thought, we cannot dismiss out intelligibility that – being the very act of giving something – betrays what it gives or substitutes itself to the gift. On the other hand, we can sacrifice the body or the soul or our food, which does not mean that we act or that we do something; we simply do not mean anything to us or to the *other*, hyper - or para-doxically.

However, “according to the entire tradition of the West, knowledge – as thirst, but as closure as well – remains the norm of the spiritual, excluding the transcendence both from intelligibility and from philosophy”¹³. Consequently, adds Fondane, “the evil, the atrocious and incomprehensible irrationality is not our inability to transform history; on the contrary, evil consists in the bizarre and passionate taste that we have for the created world, in those yearnings for the sensible, in our pitiful habit of accepting to be hurt and humiliated by the deficiencies of the empiric. God has truly given us only one gift: the intelligible separated from the body, indifferent to pain and joy; only its deliberate and continuous perfection may lead to man’s becoming godly *hic et nunc*”. This standpoint has consequences amongst the most fatal regarding the authoritative status of the ethical imperative, of the autarchy of the so-called „ethical reason” whose adjusting function was postulated by Plato¹⁴. According to moral reasoning, imitative art destroys the inner harmony of the soul, creating inferior worlds according to the irrational part of the soul (fervent-appetent), producing “bad disposal, pleasing its irrational part ..., starting illusions, being far away from the truth) (605 b-c). The unworthy things, in comparison with the truth, subordinated to the evil (“that destroys and corrupts everything”, 608 e) are the imitation of foreign suffering, sufferance itself being the principle that drags man towards pain. In order for pain not to be an obstacle for the truth, man has to “obey the law, in the way the law commands”; the hostile principle of the logos and of the interior law, “reason and law” (604 b) opposes the irrationality (of evil, sufferance, pain). As such, the Good (“the one that keeps and brings use” 608 e) is the rational part of the soul, reason indicating “the greatest good” (604 c) and “that which is best in us wants to listen to this rational part” (604 d). Thus, ethical thought – considers Fondane – suffocates free thinking, especially because, starting with Plato’s thematization, rational knowledge has not only found a precious ally in the ethical imperative, but this alliance has also questioned the poetic good, the human good and the ethical Good. “The fight of the speculative, the theoretical, and the ethical against poetry” creates “this

contempt of sufferance, of the shameful biases, of the reckless part of our soul, of the imagination ...: there are truths of the ethical, idealist super-ego, which is remorselessly armed for the destruction of the irrational, affective, imaginative and real ego”¹⁵. We need to mention, however, that the Platonic Good is not (only) ethical, but also metaphysical,¹⁶ and its “theoretical” implication is but an effect of the *theocentric* anteriority of Ideas. This postulate has fed the entire thought that asserts itself from (Neo)Platonism. Thus, if God is the supreme Good, immutable and immortal for St. Augustine, any created nature, as it comes from God, is good; “all that is natural is good”¹⁷. On the contrary, for Spinoza, “in its own nature, nothing will be called perfect or imperfect”, the true good being only the means by which the soul is united with Nature. The ethical finality of the straightening of the intellect or the supreme Good consists “in coming to enjoy, if possible, such nature, together with the others”¹⁸

That which passes as unintelligible for reflexive philosophy is the suspect taste for the created world, the appetite for the sensible, the exposure to the empirical, the body – in one word – from which God is exiled. Are not all these the constitutive elements of a history? Not a pervert history, but a perverted one, whose significance is overthrown (and subjoined) precisely in order to be intelligible. “There is not, for Fondane, greater sleight of hand in the history of humankind than this transmutation of all values”, which leads to the conclusion (overthrown as well) that, although “there is no trace of reason in the world”, it can nevertheless be understood as proclamation of a report of meaning: the coincidence between the meaning of conscience and the meaning of history¹⁹. Nevertheless, writes Ricoeur, there is a latent paradox in history: “we say: *history, the singular form of the noun*, because we expect a human meaning to unify and to make this sole history of humankind reasonable; it is precisely this implicit bet that the *rationalist philosopher* (my italics) tries to explain, writing a history of the conscience; but we also say *men, men, plural*, and define history as the science of the men of the past, because we expect people to appear as multiple centers of humanity; it is exactly this suspicion that is brought to light by the *existential philosopher* (my italics), dedicating himself to singular works, where the cosmos is re-organized around an exceptional center of existence and thought”²⁰. Paradoxically, singular history deletes human singularity, as it aims only at the flow of events as an extensive development of meaning, by starting from a multiplicity of organizing centers that are precisely the central events that unify in a concrete rational order. “This antinomy of historical time – continues Ricoeur – is the secret of the hesitation between two fundamental «dispositions» of human beings towards their own history, whereas the reading of history as proclamation of the conscience inclines towards the *optimism of the idea* (my italics); moreover, the reading of history as an explosion of centers of conscience leads to a *tragic vision of man’s ambiguity* (my italics)”²¹. It is evident that history does not have a

meaning of its own for the rationalist philosophy condemned by Fondane (resembling “the story of a madman told by an idiot”); what gives it, nevertheless, a comprehensible significance is the history of the conscience that subjects it to objective knowledge and for which there is a progress subsumed to a meliorist vision. This conception seems, however, to annihilate history in its human characteristics (as, in the end, it is a history of *man*), seeing it only as a series of facts and events²². On the contrary, and this is Fondane’s position as well (as that of any other existential philosopher), what is of significance is not the fascination of some false objectivity, of a history without people and human values, but a history that has as object the very human subject. Not the suppression of history in the system, but its animation in man. Far from the historical optimism of triumphal humanism, this vision highlights man’s ambiguity, the equivocal of each human history, the little multiple histories that undermine the conscience that supervises the unique history. For Fondane, the rationalist optimism that marks the philosophy of history²³ “is at the origin of the most important evils that the modern world experiences”. A demagogical reason that promises the suppression of contradictions, the establishing of an ideal equilibrium, where man may find a place in a history that is nothing but “the exteriorization of the Spirit in *time*”. For this to happen, as it was seen, it has to renounce everything that still is, within it, tied to the sensible, to the corporal, the source of every form of irrationality. The paradox is the following: to give up the world in the name of an Idea that promises the world²⁴. However, “the modern world did not understand anything from this desperate attempt to make *the cohabitation of man with history possible*” (my italics)²⁵.

Fondane’s position could perhaps be better situated in all its complexity by means of a short text of E. Lévinas, called *L’Antiplatonisme de la philosophie contemporaine de la signification*²⁶, a text that highlights the synchrony of Fondane’s choices (up to a point) in the philosophical context of his time and it also underlines a misunderstanding of the deep implications that would lead to a so-called surpassing of Platonism. Contemporary philosophy has completely overturned the Platonic structure of the world, because it considers that, writes Lévinas, “the intelligible cannot be conceived outside the becoming that suggests it”, ignoring the supervised sensible. “The entire picturesque of history and all cultures are no longer the obstacles that separate us from the essential and from the Intelligible, but ways that take us there”. It is not so much only a correlation between intelligence and the intelligible, between thought and language, but rather “the superimposing of a type of *proximity* with a type of *nearness*, a *kinship* that unites intelligence and the intelligible in the unique plan of the world that forms that «fundamental historicity» that Merleau-Ponty talks about”. We could talk about the consanguinity of intelligence and the intelligible, the latter being situated “in the prolongation of the individual’s concrete existence”,

and not before it. “The antiplatonism of contemporary philosophy consists in this subordination of the intellect to the expression”, and in order for this re-positioning to be efficient, the entire density of history is needed, as the access to the intelligible passes through the sensible world. Although discordant, Fondane’s conception regarding the cohabitation of man and history (which is actually a kinship – and not a separation, despite the difference – between the intelligible and the sensible) adheres to this vision (antiplatonic and yet antirationalist) to such an extent that it could have subscribed with no hesitation to the next situation described by Lévinas: “It would suffice to show the purely operator and provisory role of man in the development and the manifestation of an assembly of terms that *make a system* ... Having a certain personal vocation, it is not the man who would invent or search or be in the possession of truth. Truth is the one that provokes and suscitates man (without caring for him), a way through which the formal or logical-mathematical structures enter in order to systematize themselves and to place themselves according to their ideal architecture, rejecting the human scaffoldings that allowed the edification ... Subjectivity would appear in the view of its own disappearance, a necessary moment for the manifestation of the structure of Being, of the Idea ... We would assist to the crumbling of man’s myth, a scope in its own, which lets another order appear, neither human, nor inhuman, ordering itself ... through the rational force of the dialectic or logical-formal system. This is the non-human order whose perfect name is anonymity”. One may see how the delimitation from an artificial anti-humanism, for which man’s historicity is one of passage or even a passing, is added to the contestation and the incrimination of the optimistic naive humanism, in favor of a return to the concrete, to a live subjectivity, in whose horizon history does not merely describe events, it is not only passage and forgetfulness, but also reactivation, memory or retention. Starting from these premises, Lévinas underlines, however, a different attitude, reclaiming Platonism, insisting on “the anteriority of meaning compared to cultural signs”. The reason is that Plato’s *separation* of the intelligible world is determined by the precedence of the world of significances (according to the atemporal world of Ideas) as against the language and the culture it expresses. This world dominates historical cultures, whose character is temporary and naive. To give significance to a situation that precedes culture means to return in a new way to Platonism. “The significance – the intelligible – consists in showing itself in its non-historical simplicity, in its absolutely disqualifiable and irreducible nudity, in existing «before» history and «before» culture”²⁷. Platonism shows the affirmation of humanism independent from culture and history. “The fact that intelligible manifestation happens in the verticality (*la droiture*) of morality and of the Work measures the limits of the historical comprehension of the world and marks the returning to Greek wisdom”. This means that *before* History

and Culture, before experience as a source of meaning and before the objective presence, the significance is situated in an Ethics of the pre-original absolute, to which the sensible of the mundane does not have access: “Neither things, nor the perceived world or the scientific world allow access to the norms of the absolute. As cultural creations, they are submerged in history. But the norms of morality do not belong to history and culture”²⁸.

“Are we on the verge of the religious that does not start, we think – wonders Fondane – but only when history stops having an intelligible meaning to us?” If rationalist humanism did not want to openly admit that history suffices for itself, “we are worlds apart from the religious”, that is, from the valorization of the concrete real and of the crediting of the redemptional world. Modernity was wrong not only about the rejection of the possibility of man’s cohabiting with a history able to match him, but also “about Christianity, ascribing it the fact that it discourages action and that it gives the key of history into the hand of God; not Christianity, but *philosophia perennis* has to be made responsible for this attitude: the transcendent in whose benefice man detached himself from the world; there has never been any God, only the intelligible, *Nous*”. The false transcendent is where the philosophers’ God was exiled, reprehended by Pascal, the God-Idea, whose truth does not signify, absent from signs and works. For this “transcendent”, history is abandoned, thrown away in the marginality of the insignificant, or is ordered according to reason or the meaning of the conscience that wants “the intelligibility of history” and “a fixed past”. However, “it is impossible for History, for Reason to transform what was into something that had never been ... It would be impossible even for God”. In *this* sense, history suffices for itself, as it excludes the reversible; its evanescence is the right measure for its being incomprehensible; we do not return to history to do something, we only do it in order to integrate its development, chaotic in appearance, in the horizon of clarity of knowledge. After all, as Lévinas writes, we can “found the religious on the unity and totality of the philosophy of being, called Spirit, we can sacrifice the very transcendence in favor of this unit that guarantees God’ efficacy in the world. ... But is this choice the only truly philosophical one?”²⁹ Without the living transcendent working in the world, would history truly have one more meaning, a truth illuminating it? But the meaning is doubled by mystery; they form together the paradoxical language of hope: “Meaning: there is a unity of meaning; it is the principle of courage to live in history. Mystery, but this meaning is hidden; nobody can say it ...; we have to make it putting ourselves at risk, but starting from the signs”³⁰. It is precisely the way in which the Christian reading of the mystery of history works, which allows it to overcome its apparent absurdity: “the fact that this history is crossed by another history whose meaning is not inaccessible, which can be understood. The Christian is thus the man that lives in the ambiguity of

profane history, but with the precious treasure of a saint history”³¹. Object of hope and faith, the historic meaning is surrational; its supernaturalism is eschatological³². This is why the key of history, about which Fondane talked, is not in God’s hand, but at the reach of man, whose mission is to close and open the world, the world at the end of time, finished and renewed.

“Could we talk about Christ as a prototype of reason, as a hero of the Idea?”, Fondane asks himself rhetorically. “Whose Christ is the one that, according to reason, dies better, Matthew’s and Marc’s, moaning: «My Lord, my Lord, why hast Thou forsaken me? » or Luke’s, screaming: «Father, into your hands I commit my spirit» and John’s, that says: «It is finished»”³³. No intelligible could give knowledge some truly significant content; *secundum rationem*, death is consumed in history, as that of any man leaving the world; *secundum fidem*, what is said shows its super-historical meaning that shakes and ends history. God’s forsaking is felt by Christ’s human nature that dies *as any man* that leaves the world, forsaken by the One who gave him life, but only in order to allow the entrusting of Life, the glory of nature absolved by the sin that brings death. Christ said these words “because he took our identity. As the Father would not be Christ’s God, unless, dissociating in an abstract way the visible from the spiritual, He had placed Himself in our condition and had never been forsaken by His Holiness”³⁴. Taking completely upon oneself the mortal human condition represents, eventually, a type of forsaking from the part of God, but not the absence of the holy nature. A type of forsaking like a kidnapping. In the last hour, all is left alone, man is left alone with himself³⁵; *in himself*, however, all is fulfilled and redeemed, all is achieved for its perfection, for the manifestation of Life³⁶. Christical death redeems history as the irreversible temporality of the world that flows *badly*³⁷, death that “remains as solidarization in sufferance with history as a whole, with its sin, as the supreme gesture of taking responsibility for the others. Thus, death remains actually as an element of the current structure of history and he who dies gives the supreme proof of his identification with it, of his character of historical being”³⁸. Christical death (and starting from here, *any* death) means responsibility for the *other*³⁹, it remains in history ending it together with the world it finishes. As history, underlines Fondane, “is no longer made to measure our reason, but God’s reason”, history belongs to the world not to Life.

This aspect ties the entire problem to the supreme paradox. Any true religious experience, writes Fondane, faces us “with a suffering, miserable, helpless God that dies deplorably on a wooden cross”. But “this helplessness was not cowardice, lack of courage and not even of possibility, but *heroism*, hence triumphant helplessness, stronger than all the powers of the world and of reason”. Consequently, it is not the emphatic heroism of the Idea, but the authentic, apparently helpless of abandonment. He who accepts the cross-form – crucial – character of Life

is reborn at the same time with Life: “God dressed in the image of the slave, or the slave full of the holly ruling power”⁴⁰. This submission that agrees to empty itself – meekness, as this is what it is about – passes through sufferance, goes over through the bleeding wound of the world. At the very core of sufferance, mercy exposes the creature to injustice⁴¹, so that sufferance should become a gift of Life. It is redeeming sufferance, lacking the purity of the uprooted life, beyond which man may only submit himself to nothingness⁴². Meekness (*humilité*) – affirms Fondane – is “that which consists in recognizing that we have no power, that we mean little, so little that we may be scared without blushing, and shake, and scream, and call for help”. And then, according to the Christic model, “it may be that true heroism ... is not the sacrifice of our own life, but *the confession of the spiritual defeat*”⁴³. If unhappiness is at the core of Christianity, this is because it is understood supernaturally, according to the metaphysics of the ascetics⁴⁴. The fact that Christ made himself a curse for us, redeeming us from the curse of the Law (Galatians 3:13) represents the essence of the unhappiness that hits the innocent one. No guilt attracts the hostility of fate, no spot darkens the purity of the unsinned; and yet, if unhappiness appears at the very core of life, apparently inaccessible, it is the surest sign that God wants to be loved. The emptiness of unhappiness is given to man, but in its unseen core – in the deep of the rotten sin – shines reborn Life. The man that was given unhappiness has no other existence except the lack felt as eviction, passing into anonymity or forsaking. A man that, in being placed in the unhappiness of distance and who is torn from himself⁴⁵, is emptied of his mundane humanity and identity, a creature without a name and address, a mellow paste, a colorless face. A “dead” man, prepared for *conversion*⁴⁶, that became nothing and that was dislocated through nihilization. To be “forsaken and poor” (Psalm 24, 17), “dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27) means to know how to leave everything in order to deepen yourself in „the void of nothingness”⁴⁷. Now only nothing hurts, the heart-breaking sufferance of an existence that is itself absent, where there is nothing else to love except the gift of the Absent.

“The thought of the suffered failure, bitter, painful, but that does not want yet to despair, nor to find an easy reconciliation” must lead us towards this radical de-creation⁴⁸. It is only when man is defeated, crushed, untied from his own humanity and mundanity that may “an exceptional appeal be established in the soul”. The confession of the spiritual defeat – until the crucial limit of unhappiness – redeems man from his fake central position, replacing him into a god-centered perspective. De-centred (and ex-centred) in order to be recentred, „man is pervaded by a complete defeat of the heart”⁴⁹, a heart evaded, torn and moved on the outside, abandoned and kidnapped. Now he has nothing to think about; his existence is anterior to thought, “it is a thought as existence”, in Fondane’s terms; „a thought of what is internal, unique,

secret, incommunicable experience, solidarity with the individual existence, for which it is as a secretion and, at the same time, the principle of inner maturing”⁵⁰. It is a thought in solidarity with existence and, at the same time, it is unhappy conscience, affected – in the wound of the sensible – by a traumatized existence that suffers „for the absence of bread, work, freedom, justice, but for the hostile presence of reality as well, of contradiction, of helplessness, of necessity, of death”⁵¹. A faded but alive conscience, even more alive as it confesses to be vulnerable, demoralized, in the sense that it does not obey the voluntary norms or imperatives, but is permeated by Good without choosing it⁵². It is a conscience created around a passive and weak self, that Lévinas calls *la mauvaise conscience*, a kind of conscience that does not do its job as it *has to*, non-intentional and disinterested, “an obliteration or a discretion of the presence”, “being that does not dare to be”, “without blame, but accused”⁵³. An abandoned type of consciousness, lost without hope (the conscience of the absolute abandonment and loss)⁵⁴ that, as the thought is correlative to it, has *nothing to do*: “As long as there still is something to do – concludes Fondane –, as long as we can hope to win by our own forces and through those of the Idea, as long as we have not lost everything yet, beyond redress, the rapport between man and God is not open yet”. This very rapport, correctly placed in the view of man, consecrates the truth according to which the ethical and the religious are indissociable, only to the extent that we do not think of – as Fondane considers – “a religion and a moral enlightened by conscience”, constituted in a “body of doctrines”, because “religion and moral function well only inside societies that have not been made aware of themselves as concepts”, where “the idea of good has not been elaborated” and “the religious feeling lies in the breathed air”⁵⁵.

Far from the activism of his own creation, of the reflexivity of the self that gives away the possibilities for intelligibility, remaining in the closed moral, freedom has another meaning, starting from the very passivity of the human, founding itself on the Good from before the possibility of choosing it⁵⁶. It is radical passivity, from beyond conscience and knowledge, from beyond the certainty of a thought that supports itself on the width of things. Non-work (or dis-entanglement) that has no place to rest, of something that precedes any start, pre-original, a start with which the thought cannot begin and up to where sight cannot see. A draw-back of thought and sight, for it has never reached the present of the representation, from which one cannot evade, no matter how hard one might try: the goodness of the immemorial Good that we do not do and do not know, but that chooses us without knowing it; “according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4)⁵⁷. This does not mean to do good *in the view* of a more equitable rapport with our own self or with another, and not with the concern of a set of imposed normative values. Good is done as if it weren’t, unknown to any intention,

unseen and unendorsed, an open possibility before any necessity. Good has a fructuous relation with the religious in “an ethical void”; hence, “the due role of the ethics, writes Fondane, is not that of acting, but that of disappearing ... Ethics is no longer in the situation of having a positive value: it is simply *suspended*”⁵⁸. It is humiliated ethics (of meekness), invisible to transparency⁵⁹, in whose virtue it is primordial not to do good, but to leave oneself be made by the Good, to open oneself (according to the “open” moral) to this lucrative passivity that dis-engages and re-engages the self *for* another⁶⁰. The confession of the spiritual defeat that Fondane talked about is, in Lévinas’ terms, an ethical confession, “a revelation that is not knowledge”⁶¹. The revelation of the Infinite (of some transcendent Good) impossible to equal, hence, impossible to thematize, of the unseen from beyond knowledge⁶², that places the being in a crisis, tearing it from the charms of the pure intelligible. It is not the conscience of something that does not regard it (as “the abstraction of the universal rules of the Law”), but the conscience of the being whose face appears in the horizon of non-indifference. If “this responsibility before the Law is a revelation of God”⁶³, the responsible being cannot look to the transcendent looking at it, as the being glories enveloped in glory. In this sense, no ethics sees the eye of God, as God “sees secretly” (Matthew 6:4). Beyond the lethargic rest of the satisfied thought that usurps the other’s “place under the sun”⁶⁴, the emptied self has to come back to the self (in a “pre-original fact of not resting in itself”), passing through unhappiness, through the extreme passivity of the distance, “banished as a foreigner even from home, ... contested in its identity and even in its poverty”, forever on a path “*better* than any rest, than any plenitude of the moment suspended in time”⁶⁵. It is the path of the existent followed by another way of thinking.

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Notes

¹ Plato, *Sophist* 249 c.

² Benjamin Fondane, "L'homme devant l'histoire ou le bruit et la fureur", *Cahiers du Sud*, XVIII (1939): 441-54, in *Le Lundi existentiel et le dimanche de l'histoire suivi de La Philosophie vivante* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1990), 123-48. All quotes with no other mention refer to this text and to this edition.

³ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1177 a.

⁴ Descartes, *Méditation deuxième*, in *Discours de la méthode suivi des Méditations* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 10 / 18, 1973), 186.

⁵ Plotinus, *Enn.* II, 9, 7, in *Enneade*, vol. I (București: Ed. Iri, 2003), 373.

⁶ "The sensible that cannot manifest itself without a body and the intelligible is separated from it" (Aristotle, *De anima*, I, 4).

⁷ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Altfel decât a fi sau dincolo de esență* (București: Ed. Humanitas, 2006), 140.

⁸ Subjectivity "embodied" as leaving the subject-self-conscience, originated in rest or in intelligible self-certainty. Subject-origin understood starting from embodiment, or ignorant subjectivity, uninterested in the intelligible: "the real subjectivity is not the one that knows, ...; it is the one that exists ethically". Søren Kierkegaard, "Post-scriptum non scientifique et définitif aux Miettes

philosophiques”, in Kierkegaard, *L'Existence* (Paris: P.U.F., 1981), 31. Isn't this a backward separation, of the sensible-body from the intelligible?

⁹ It is precisely the task of the philosophy of existence, which, opposing the intellectualism of reflexive philosophy, consists in “discovering a psychic life irreducible to knowledge. Did this opposition – wonders Lévinas – have enough energy to be able to oppose the returning of intellectualist models?” Emmanuel Lévinas, *Altfel decât a fi sau dincolo de esență*, 172, knowing that „reason is never more versatile than when it questions itself”. E. Lévinas, „Entretien avec R. Kearny”, in *Éthique comme philosophie première* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, [1981] 1998), 22.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Altfel decât a fi sau dincolo de esență*, 169.

¹¹ Lévinas, 170.

¹² Lévinas, 170.

¹³ Lévinas, 205. “Everywhere in Western philosophy, where the spiritual and the rational always consisted in knowledge, one can see this nostalgia for the wholeness. As if wholeness had been lost and this loss were the spirit's sin. Then, the panoramic vision of the real is the truth that gives the spirit its entire satisfaction”. E. Lévinas, *Éthique et Infini* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 70.

¹⁴ Regarding the fragment from *The Republic* 595 a – 608 b (from where we will quote hereinafter), see Fondane's indictment from “Fals tratat de estetică”, in B. Fundoianu, *Imagini și cărți* (București: Ed. Minerva, 1980), 612 – 23.

¹⁵ “Fals tratat de estetică”, in B. Fundoianu *Imagini și cărți*, 622, 623.

¹⁶ According to Teilhard de Chardin, moral and metaphysics present themselves as the two faces of the same system: “Metaphysics is doubled necessarily with a Moral and vice versa”, which marks the dependence of any moral of the primacy of a metaphysic principle. *La Morale peut-elle se passer de soubassements métaphysiques avoués ou inavoués?*, apud Madeleine Barthélemy-Madaule, *Bergson et Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 364.

¹⁷ *De natura boni*, I, 19.

¹⁸ *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, 4-5.

¹⁹ “The clarity that I search for in myself passes through a history of the conscience I need history in order to escape my own subjectivity and to try, in and beyond me, *the being-man*”. Paul Ricoeur, *Istorie și adevăr* (București: Ed. Anastasia, 1996), 45.

²⁰ Ricoeur, 50-51.

²¹ Ricoeur, 52.

²² The aspect was foreseen by J.-J. Rousseau, who affirms that “history, in general, is defective, as it only registers sensible facts”; “it rather shows actions than people” *Émile*, 4th Book, (Paris: Flammarion, 1937), 314-315.

²³ For which the possible guilty could be, he writes, that “humanism which, lacking pessimism, had bet too much on the divided intelligible and on the divine, neglecting the *real* man more than it should have”, a humanism that overestimated reason, introducing it in history.

²⁴ “I ended up believing - adds Fondane - that what is desirable, but it is out of our reach, is the Evil and that, on the other hand, that thing which is completely negative, without substance, the renouncing, is the supreme Good”.

²⁵ Attempt made by “a humanism that would reconcile reason with life. ... But is this humanism possible? And, generally, is any «humanism» possible?”, asks he in *Conștiința nefericită* (București: Ed. Humanitas, 1993), 277.

²⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, “L’Antiplatonicisme de la philosophie contemporaine de la signification”, in *Humanisme de l’autre homme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972), 30-34.

²⁷ As opposed to post-cartesian thought, where *sum* is identified – assumed, absorbed – by *cogito*: “That which marks modernity – writes Lévinas – is the fact that it pushes the being’s identification and appropriation by knowledge, until being and knowledge are identified”. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Éthique comme philosophie première*, 73.

²⁸ “I think – confirms Fondane – that precisely the appearance in the world of the autonomous Ethics, of the Kantian man conceived under the personification of the angel, promoted as «universal legislator», created eventually a wave of *confessed* immorality”. The statement is true for Spinoza’s ethics, where “the supreme good of those who practice virtue is to know God”, ruled by reason. The highlight is on the good of knowledge. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, XXVIII, XXXVI, unlike Plato’s perspective on the Idea of Good „as the cause of knowledge and truth”. *The Republic* VI, 509 a.

²⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Altfel decât a fi sau dincolo de esență*, 202.

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Istorie și adevăr*, 107.

³¹ Ricoeur, 107-8. “Living through the exclusive powers of history is living in sin”, writes D. Staniloae; hence, the reality of the holiness in history has to be recognized: “only through a power from above may one live in history without sin”, so that “history may be lived in communion with heaven”. *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului* (Craiova: Ed. Omniscope, 1993), 310-311. However, this cohabiting with history means, at the same time, its surpassing. According to Gerhard von Rad, *Théologie de l’Ancien Testament*, the only theology produced by Israel is a theology of history organized around the narrative and the prophecy. Could this tendency be, in Fondane’s case, the expression of his surpassing the Hebrew theology of history?

³² Talking about the historicity of the human being, Rudolf Bultmann claims that “the decisive history is not the world history ..., but the history lived by every individual. For this history, the meeting with Christ is the decisive event, the event through which the individual starts to exist historically because he starts to exist eschatologically”. If the eschatological event happens in history, it means that „eschatology understood in its authentic Christian meaning is not the future term of history, but that history is absorbed by eschatology”, so that “the history of man as a person may no longer be understood as a function of world’s history, but is located beyond world history”. *Foi et Compréhension. Eschatologie et démythologization* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 124, 127, 128.

³³ Fondane refers to Matthew 27:46, Marc 15:34, Luke 23:46, John 19:30.

³⁴ St. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, III, 25.

³⁵ “This time, reason has to give up its place: it dies on the verge of man *alone at last*; it stops being eternal and re-becomes «historical», image and symbol of Sin, historical as well, not eternal. This is the supreme moment when man finally steps out of history”; “*When everything is lost*”. Fondane, *Conștiința nefericită*, 282, 273.

³⁶ “Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled” (John 19:28). He “experienced His gradual passing and the complete

forsaken of God”. Stăniloae, 322, but remains *in* God despite being forsaken. “His body was neither forsaken, nor separated from His Holiness ... nor was His soul abandoned in hell”; He “crowned our nature with the glory and honor of purity”. Sf. Ioan Damaschin, *Despre cele două voințe ale lui Hristos* (București: Ed. Anastasia, 2004), 471.

³⁷ “Making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16).

³⁸ Stăniloae, 311. We must remember that the passage in Marc 15:34, resuming the Psalm 21:1 offers a privileged hermeneutical example of a resuming of meaning. „On the point of death – comments P. Ricoeur – Jesus *dresses* his sufferance in the terms of the Psalm, in the interior of which He *lives*”, expression of a theology of the paradox, „that awakens hope even from the deep in sufferance”. *Cum să înțelegem Biblia* (Iași: Ed. Polirom, 2002), 237, 252. Hartmut Gese sees in the restructuring of this psalmic impetus the mark of an *apocalyptic theology*: “God’s eschatological reign is shown in the redemption of the faithful man, extorted from death”. „Psalm 22 und das Neue Testament”, in *Vom Sinai zum Zion. Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1974), 192.

³⁹ “A completely free *for*, which breaks any connection with the interest; a *for* of the human fraternity outside any pre-established system”. E. Lévinas, *Altfel decât a fi sau dincolo de esență*, 205.

⁴⁰ D. Stăniloae, *Trăirea lui Dumnezeu în ortodoxie* (Cluj-Napoca: Ed. Dacia, 1993), 81. „They feared death; he was punished to death. They thought of the cross as of the most undignified way of dying; he was crucified. By renouncing all that, while we had wanted to have them, made us live wrongly, he reduced their value”. St. Augustine, *De vera religione*, XVI, 31.

⁴¹ “The metaphysical category ... that we call unhappiness ... corresponds, in another human register, to the collective ethical category that we call injustice”. Fondane, *Conștiința nefericită*, 9.

⁴² “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” (Galatians 6:3).

⁴³ As for Kierkegaard, “the true knight of faith is a witness, never a master”; “that is why any man who wants to serve the Truth is a martyr”, “all Christ’s life was sufferance; the apostle suffered for it, the witness of truth, the martyr”. *Crăinte et tremblement; Point de vue explicatif de mon oeuvre; L’Instant*, no. 9, in Kierkegaard, *L’Existence*, 79, 55, 35.

⁴⁴ “The extraordinary greatness of Christianity comes from the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for sufferance, but a supernatural use of sufferance”. Simone Weil, *Greutatea și harul* (București: Ed. Humanitas, 2003), 123.

⁴⁵ “Tear out of me this body and this soul in order to make them your own and allow to still exist in me, in eternity, only this tearing itself”. S. Weil, *La connaissance surnaturelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 205.

⁴⁶ “Conversion is a violent and painful operation” says S. Weil, “an effort of the unhappy and blind will, for it is lightless”, blind due to an excess of light, radical detaching and distancing, loss of energy; “It is a death. Conversion is this death”. See *La source grecque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 98 – 104.

⁴⁷ Thomas de Kempis, *De imitatione Christi*, III, 8, 3. “The target of all efforts is to become nothing”; “to be nothing in order to be at your true place in the whole”. Weil, *Greutatea și harul*, 72, 74.

⁴⁸ To de-create or to disengage the creature in us means, for S. Weil, “to pass from the created to the uncreated”. *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), 163. Concerning this issue, as it appears in the writings of this mystic of modernity whose thought is related to that of Fondane, see our book, *Spiritul de finețe. Cincisprezece meditații* (București: Ed. Paideia, 2009), chapter „Paradoxul decreației” [“The Paradox of de-Creation”], 119 – 144.

⁴⁹ Thomas de Kempis, I, 21

⁵⁰ Fondane, *Conștiința nefericită*, 8.

⁵¹ Fondane, 9. It is the paradoxical condition of this conscience that erases itself exactly in order to expose itself and let itself be affected, as S. Weil confesses: “Those for whom the unhappiness that got in the flesh is the unhappiness of the world itself in their time may be happy. They have the possibility and the function to know it in its truth, to contemplate the world’s unhappiness in its reality. It is the very redeeming function”. *Pensées sans ordre concernant l’amour de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 76.

⁵² Ethic of the de-moralized conscience that substitutes that “You have to!” with a primordial “It has to!”. See Lévinas, *Éthique comme philosophie première*, 62. With the risk of forcing a contradiction of meaning, we feel that what Fondane calls “strange categorical imperatives” refers to the visible rational moral, affirmative and normative, possibly integrated in the categories of thought. But when he writes that „a kind of HAVE TO, an *invisible ethics* (my italics) governs not only the human acts, but also the speed of light and the trajectory of the stars”, we may interpret this as an ethical proposal, pre-original, unauthorized or “weak”, before freedom and choice, as a prime philosophy (in Lévinas’ terms) or as a para-doxical expression of “the revelations of death” that are linked to the categories of life. Thus, “Job’s «open» moral is opposed to a «closed» moral of the universe”. Fondane, *Conștiința nefericită*, 267.

⁵³ Lévinas, *Éthique comme philosophie première*, 85-87. “Weakness without cowardice, as the heat of mercy”, he writes in *Humanisme de l’autre homme*, 11.

⁵⁴ Just like poetry, man is fated “to absolutely lose conscience of what he is”. Fondane, *Imagini și cărți*, 683.

⁵⁵ *Conștiința nefericită*, 48. Moral and religion neither understood as a burden of man deprived of his freedom, nor as “morality and religion” cherished even if we did not know that our soul was eternal, as Spinoza thinks in *Ethics*, V, XLI, but in the virtue of the eternal Good that guides life’s correctness. “For he lives rightly he who guides himself according to the rules of divine law”. St. Bonaventura, *De reductione artium ad theologiam*, 24.

⁵⁶ The freedom of choice between Good and Evil that rational philosophy (and theology) proposes is nothing but “the absolute proof that we are not free beings, that there is not the slightest freedom in the category of the real”, writes Fondane. In his terms, the real is linked to the rigorist ethical (visible) category, of the choice placed under the imperative of some already compelled freedom, formal and abstract, whereas life is part of the metaphysical category, whose freedom breathes in the unseen Good that precedes the act of its choice: “There where there is Good and Evil, the real exists, ethics exists; the punishment consists exclusively in the man’s banishment from the metaphysical category, that of the real life, in the land of the ethical category, that of the real”. Rimbaud *golanul*, in B. Fundoianu, *Imagini și cărți*, 501.

⁵⁷ A paradox felt by J.-J. Rousseau, when he writes - in *Émile*, the 4th book - that “the active being obeys, the passive being commands”. To be passive means following nature, hence placing oneself in the active obedience of the good.

⁵⁸ *Conștiința nefericită*, 142.

⁵⁹ When I think of the ethical, according to its point of view - explains Kierkegaard -, I expect “to see the good triumphant”, “but it is impossible to represent it”. It has nothing to do with the visible, as it wishes to detach from the exteriority of the aesthetic and to unite with the sphere of the religious in the inner core of the existent. The ethical is thus nothing else but “a sphere of passage” from the aesthetic to the religious. *Les stades sur le chemin de la vie*, Lettre au lecteur, § 3, in Kierkegaard, *L'Existence*, 147.

⁶⁰ We have a double moment here: of the un-freedom (the de-creation or the disengagement) necessary for the conversion; and that of the given freedom as a gift (of the re-making by the Good that has chosen us), a moment where we suffer a change (Maine de Biran). “We are free - writes S. Weil in *La source grecque* - after the conversion (already during it) and not before it”. It is the model envisaged by Henri Bergson, according to the open and the dynamic religion, offered by “moral's greatest figures that have marked history” and that “compose together a divine fort where they invite us to enter”. *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion* (Paris: P.U.F., 1932), 67.

⁶¹ E. Lévinas, *Éthique et Infini*, 104. „The glory of the Infinite reveals itself in what it is able to do to the witness”. Lévinas, 105.

⁶² For Lévinas, the idea of the Infinite implies thinking of the Unequal, not of inequality as such, but thinking of that which cannot be equaled, that which is without equal. In the horizon of ethics, inequality is not frustrating; it is an unmistakable mark of alterity and of difference. But is its confession not the very proof of that which has no equal? Incapable of ever equaling the Infinite revealing itself in the witness? To rise to its level, that cannot be equaled?

⁶³ E. Lévinas, *Éthique et Infini*, 111.

⁶⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, t. I, fr. 60, édition Michel Le Guern (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 90.

⁶⁵ E. Lévinas, *Altfel decât a fi sau dincolo de esență*, 163, 198.