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IN THE PRESENCE OF WHOM WE ACT FROM A DISTANCE: the normativity of participation and modern evil, beyond Bauman and Levinas

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SUMMARY:

Zygmunt Bauman showed that the Holocaust cannot be explained by the hatred of crowds, but rather by the modern capacity to produce moral distance: division of labor, replacement of moral responsibility with technology, invisibility of consequences, and expulsion of victims from the "universe of obligation." Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, Bauman situated the source of morality in the proximity of the other and concluded that it shrinks with distance; therefore, he called for an "ethics of distance," the possibility of which he himself questioned. It is argued that this doubt stems from the choice of source. If responsibility arises from the face, and the face is precisely what modern organization makes disappear, the ethics that should resist organization depend on what organization suppresses. The answers that dispense with proximity—the problem of many hands (Thompson), complicity (Kutz), social connection (Young)—either depend on the participatory intention of the agent, or do not delimit to whom he is accountable. The philosophy of normativity developed in **Is Tomorrow Possible?** It offers another source: the relationship of the actor with those who participate in the common condition upon which the action is directed. In this architecture, the normative relationship does not pass through encounter, but rather through condition; the direction of the action does not depend on the agent's representation; the circle of those before whom one acts is drawn by the reorganized condition, and not by who has the power to define it; and the due response falls upon positions —who institutes, who holds the power to grant and deny, who repeats—and not upon intentions. Faced with the three arrangements that, according to Bauman, render action morally indifferent, this architecture shows that each of them operates on the agent's perception, while the relationship that the architecture describes lies in the structure of the action. From this, three points emerge where mismanagement can be stopped before violence: the conversion of participation into permission, the boundary where a repeated gesture can no longer be described as irrelevant, and the refusal to treat the reorganization of a common condition as a technical or private matter. The points that this architecture does not reach are also delimited: the fanatic who rejects the reason it assumes, the loss without author or holder, and the positive measure of the response.

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KEYWORDS: modern evil; adiaphorization; participation; responsibility; complicity; Bauman; Levinas.

ABSTRACT:
Zygmunt Bauman showed that the Holocaust is not explained by mass hatred but by the modern capacity to produce moral distance: the division of labor, the substitution of technical for moral responsibility, the invisibility of consequences and the expulsion of victims from the "universe of obligation". Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, Bauman located the source of morality in the proximity of the other and concluded that it shrinks with distance; he therefore called for an "ethics of distance" whose very feasibility he doubted.
The article argues that this doubt follows from the choice of source. If responsibility arises from the face, and the face is precisely what modern organization makes disappear, the ethics meant to resist organization depends on what organization suppresses. Approaches that dispense with proximity — the problem of many hands (Thompson), complicity (Kutz), social connection (Young) — either depend on the agent's participatory intention or fail to delimit before whom the agent responds. The philosophy of normativity developed in *Is tomorrow possible?* offers another source: the relationship between the agent and those who participate in the common condition on which the action bears. In this architecture the normative relation does not pass through encounter but through the condition; the direction of action does not depend on the agent's representation; the circle of those before whom one acts is traced by the reorganized condition, not by whoever has the power to define it; and the response owed falls on positions — those who institute, those who hold the faculty to grant and refuse, those who repeat — rather than on intentions. The article tests this architecture against the three arrangements which, according to Bauman, render action morally indifferent, and shows that each operates on the agent's perception, whereas the relation the architecture describes lies in the structure of the action. Three points follow at which administered evil can be halted before violence: the conversion of participation into permission, the threshold at which a repeated gesture can no longer be described as irrelevant, and the refusal to treat the reorganization of a common condition as a technical or private matter. The article also marks what this architecture cannot achieve: the fanatic who rejects the reason it assumes, loss without author or holder, and the positive measure of the
response.
KEYWORDS: modern evil; adiaphorisation; participation; responsibility; complicity; Bauman; Levinas.

The empty room

In the early days of 1933, in a German civil service office, an employee drafted the first definition of "non-Aryan" in a civil service regulation.
There was no one in front of him. The rule did not mandate arrests, did not expropriate, did not

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It killed. It altered a distinction in an administrative text. Raul Hilberg wrote, and Bauman repeated, that at that moment the fate of European Jews was sealed.1

Hilberg's statement is retrospective, and it would be unfair to ask more of her than she says. But the scene she describes has a structure that is of interest to moral philosophy. Whoever wrote the definition saw no face. Perhaps they weren't thinking of anyone in particular. They acted on words. And yet, after that line, thousands of people found themselves facing a reality different from the one they had received: the bureaucracy, the profession, the citizenship they participated in were no longer the same for them.

A moral theory that makes the responsibility of the actor dependent on the encounter with the other, on seeing their face or being near their presence, will have difficulty explaining what that employee did to those people. It will have to say that, in that empty room, there was not yet a moral relationship, and that it would only appear later, when someone, in another office or on a train platform, was finally face to face with the victims. It is precisely this interval—the space between the act and those to whom it reaches—that, according to Bauman, modernity has learned to widen and exploit.

There is, however, another hypothesis: that the employee was already, in that room, in the presence of those whose position his line altered, and that he was in their presence not because he saw them, but because he was acting upon a condition in which they participated. If this hypothesis holds, the distance that modern organization produces does not suppress the moral relationship; it only suppresses the perception of it. And an evil that depends on suppressing perception can be stopped in a place that perception cannot reach.

§ 1 — The problem

1.1 The evil that doesn't need hatred

The central thesis of *Modernity and the Holocaust* is well-known and remains disturbing. The Holocaust was not an eruption of pre-modern barbarity into a civilization that was alien to it, nor the product of a sick collective personality. It was, in Bauman's words, a "horrendous but legitimate product" of modern civilization, which was its necessary, though not sufficient, condition.2 What modernity provided was not hatred, which existed before it, but the instruments to dispense with it: a bureaucracy capable of breaking down a task into partial operations, each technically irreproachable; a division of labor that distances each contributor from the final result; an instrumental rationality that measures actions by their efficiency, and not by what they do to the people they affect.

The thesis has known parallels. Arendt, when discussing Eichmann, described an evil committed without depth of motive, by someone whose most visible mark was...
inability to think from another's point of view3 ; and subsequent historiography has shown,

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[1] BAUMAN, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1998), chapter 1, section “The social production of moral invisibility”, quoting Raul Hilberg. For the reconstruction of the bureaucratic process, HILBERG (1961).

[2] BAUMAN (1998), Preface and Chapter 1, section “The Meaning of the Civilizing Process”: “Modern civilization was not a sufficient condition for the Holocaust; it was, however, most certainly its necessary condition.”

[3] ARENDT (1999), especially the Postscript, in which the expression "banality of evil" is revisited and clarified.

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With Christopher Browning's study of a reserve police battalion, in which ordinary, middle-aged men with no special ideological training became executioners in a few weeks , Bauman takes the thesis further than both of them, because he shifts the explanation from the agent to the organization. The decisive factor is not that the executioners were ordinary, but rather that the structure made their status irrelevant.

Bauman summarized the mechanism in the idea of a social production of moral indifference and invisibility. Echoing John Lachs, he observed that between intentions and actions there is “an infinity of insignificant acts and inconsequential actors,” and that the intermediary “hides the results of the action from the actors’ view.”5 The increasing distance between the act and its consequences, he wrote, “nullifies the moral significance of the act.”6 And to this distance was added another operation, which the Nazis did not invent but perfected: making the humanity of the victims invisible, removing them from the “universe of obligation”—an expression from Helen Fein—in which one can raise some meaningful moral question.7

—, that is, from the "outer limits of the social territory within the

In the appendix added to the book, Bauman named the combined effect of these mechanisms: *adiaphorization,* the process by which the organization renders action “neither good nor bad, measurable by technical standards […] but not by moral values.” And he enumerated the arrangements that produce it: “(1) widening the distance between the action and its consequences beyond the reach of the moral impulse; (2) excluding some ‘others’ from the category of potential objects of moral conduct, of ‘potential’ faces; (3) dismembering other human objects of action into aggregates of specific functional traits, kept so separate that the opportunity to reunify the face does not occur.”8

1.2 The question

The strength of Bauman's diagnosis lies in the fact that he doesn't need monsters. The perpetrators were, for the most part, "normal people"; the cruelty that Milgram and Zimbardo observed in the laboratory resulted "from a vicious social arrangement and not from the participants' addiction."9 But it is also from this that the difficulty arises. If modern evil operates on morally normal people, distancing them from the consequences of their actions, the crucial question is not how to reinforce these people's convictions. It is whether there is a moral relationship that distance does not suppress—and, if so, where it allows us to stop the process before it becomes violence.

Bauman answered the first part of the question negatively, and the reason for his answer lies in the source he chose for morality.

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[4] BROWNING (1992), about the 101st Battalion of the Order Police and the 1942 massacres in Poland.

[5] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 1, section “The social production of moral invisibility”, referring to LACHS (1981).

[6] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 1, same section.

[7] BAUMAN (1998), chap. 1, same section, with reference to FEIN (1979), p. 4.

[8] BAUMAN (1998), Appendix, section “Social Manipulation of Morality”. The term *adiaphorization* only appears in the Appendix; in the chapters, Bauman speaks of the social production of moral indifference and invisibility.

[9] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 1, section “The social production of moral indifference”, and chapter 6, section “The social nature of evil”, based on MILGRAM (1974) and HANEY; BANKS; ZIMBARDO (1973).

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The scope of the question needs to be clear. It is not about offering a historical explanation of the Holocaust, nor a general theory of evil, and it does not hold that a moral philosophy can, by itself, prevent genocide. The question is narrower: whether there is a source of normativity whose force does not diminish with the distance that modern organization produces, and what it allows us to say—and demand—of those who act through this organization.

§ 2 — The morality of proximity and faceless responses

2.1 Bauman: Morality Shrinks with Distance

Chapter 7 of *Modernity and the Holocaust* proposes what Bauman, with declared modesty, calls some steps towards a sociological theory of morality.
Against Durkheim, he argues that society is not a "factory" of morality: "Morality is not a product of society. Morality is something that society manipulates—exploits, redirects, squeezes."10 The source of morality is pre-societal, and Bauman finds it in Levinas's description of "being with others" as responsibility. Hence the central formula of the chapter: "Responsibility, that building block of all moral behavior, arises from proximity to the other. Proximity means responsibility, and responsibility is proximity."11

The formula has a consequence that Bauman draws without hesitation. If responsibility is proximity, distance is its absence: "The moral attribute of proximity is responsibility; the moral attribute of social distance is the absence of moral relationship or heterophobia."12 And morality, "inextricably tied to human proximity, […] seems to conform to the law of optical perspective. It appears large and thick when close to the eye. With increasing distance, responsibility for the other shrinks and the moral dimensions of the object become blurred, until both reach the point of disappearance and vanish from sight."13

The diagnosis of the Holocaust stems from this premise. Modern organization does not need to corrupt the moral impulse; it only needs to create distance. "The visual capacity of the moral impulse, limited as it is by the principle of proximity, remains constant, while the distance at which human action can be effective rapidly increases and
consequent."14 Modern evil occupies the space between the reach of action and the reach of vision.

The consequence for the remedy is equally clear, and Bauman does not hide it. If the morality we know is short-sighted by construction — "It tends to stay at home and in the present"15 —, the ethics capable of resisting mediated action would have to be different. In the appendix, Bauman takes up Joseph Weizenbaum's demand for "an ethics of distance and of

[10] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 7, section "Pre-societal sources of morality".
[11] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 7, section "Social proximity and moral responsibility".
[12] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 7, same section.
[13] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 7, section "Social production of distance".
[14] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 7, same section.
[15] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 7, section "Social suppression of moral responsibility".

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distant consequences," and adds that it would be "different from any other known morality: an ethic that would extend above the socially erected obstacles of mediated action and the functional reduction of the human person." And then he doubts: "Whether such an ethic constitutes a plausible practical perspective is an entirely different question."16

The doubt is consistent with the premises. An ethics of distance that derived its strength from proximity would be contradictory; an ethics of distance that derived it from another place would have... He doesn't specify where it comes from, and Bauman doesn't. The remedies he actually offers are of a different order: pluralism, which Milgram showed capable of paralyzing obedience when authorities disagree; the duty to resist socialization, which Arendt formulated; the testimony of the few who resisted, which shows that placing self-preservation above moral duty was "a choice."17 These are real remedies, but none of them is the ethics of distance. The first is an institutional condition; the other two appeal to individual conscience, whose reach Chapter 7 itself declared limited. Years later, in *Postmodern Ethics,* Bauman would return to the theme without altering the premise: the "moral partnership of two" continues to be the original place of morality, and the entry of the third, with society and its rules, is the point at which morality begins to be managed and, with that, put at risk.18

There is also an internal tension, and it is this that leads to Levinas. In Bauman's quotation of Levinas, proximity is not spatial: the other "is not only close to me in space or close like a relative, but approaches me essentially insofar as I feel—insofar as I am—responsible for him"; and "Proximity does not revert to its intentionality."19 Bauman's use of proximity, however, is gradable and measurable: it is the physical proximity of Milgram's experiments, in which obedience increased as the victim moved out of sight, and the social proximity that decreases "with each additional centimeter of social distance."20 Bauman's sociology converted an ethical proximity into perceptual proximity. It is this conversion that allows for the diagnosis—the organization can manipulate perceptual distances —and it is this that makes it inescapable: what the organization manipulates is precisely what morality depends on.

2.2 Levinas: Responsibility Without a Middle Term

Levinas offers Bauman more than Bauman takes advantage of. In *Totality and Infinity,* the relationship with the other is not a form of knowledge: the face "speaks to me and thus invites me to an unparalleled relationship with a power that is exercised, whether it be enjoyment or not."

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[16] BAUMAN (1998), Appendix, with reference to WEIZENBAUM (1976).

[17] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 6, section "Pluralism of power and power of consciousness"; chapter 7, "Final observations"; chapter 8.

[18] BAUMAN (1993), especially the chapters on "moral partnership" and social spacing, in which responsibility continues to arise from encounter and society appears as a manager, not a source, of morality.

[19] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 7, section "Pre-societal sources of morality", citing LEVINAS (1985), p. 95-101.

[20] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 6, section "Inhumanity as a function of social distance", and chapter 7, section "Social suppression of moral responsibility". The proximity experiments are in MILGRAM (1974), chapter 4.

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knowledge."21 The responsibility that arises from this precedes my representation of the other and does not depend on their proximity in space. At this point, Bauman's sociological reading simplifies Levinas, and the simplification has consequences: a responsibility that precedes knowledge should not shrink when knowledge fails.

Levinas also saw the danger that Bauman would describe. The preface to *Totality and Infinity* opens with war and the totality it reveals: in it, "Individuals are reduced to bearers of forms that command them without their knowledge."22 And the book ends by acknowledging that politics, when left to itself, distorts that which gave rise to it: the relationship with others, when passing through the third party, "aspires to a State, to institutions, to laws, which are the source of universality. But politics left to itself carries within itself a tyranny."
The reason is precisely what Bauman would call adiaphorization: politics judges according to universal rules and ceases to see "The Other as a uniqueness and face (which the visible of the political leaves invisible)".23

The difficulty lies in where Levinas situates the origin of the relationship. The face presents itself "as the very rectitude of face-to-face interaction, without the mediation of any image"; and "Every social relationship, as a derivative, goes back to the presentation of the Other to the Self, without any intermediary of image or sign, solely through the expression of the face."24 Responsibility does not depend on my *seeing* the other, but on the other *presenting himself.* It is, by construction, a relationship without a middle term.

This has two consequences for the problem of mismanagement. The first is that mediated action, as such, does not find the origin of responsibility. The official in the empty room is not facing anyone; no one presents themselves to him. If the moral relationship always goes back to a face-to-face encounter, it is necessary that he, or someone else, comes face to face with the victims for his action to acquire the meaning that the norm already had when he wrote it. The second consequence concerns the third. Levinas does not ignore that the other is never alone: "The third observes me in the eyes of another—language is justice. It is not that there is a face first and that, subsequently, the being that it manifests or expresses is concerned with justice."25 But the third, in *Totality and Infinity,* is "all of humanity that observes us," and its revelation "only occurs through the face."26 The passage to the third extends responsibility to infinity, and does not delimit it. It does not say before whom the one who acts through a chain of mediations finds himself—it says that he is before everyone, through each one who presents himself to him. In *Autrement qu'être,* Levinas would return to the third at greater length, and it is there that justice appears as "comparison of incomparables"; but also there

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[21] LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity* (1988), p. 176. The quotations follow the Portuguese translation by José Pinto Ribeiro.

[22] LEVINAS (1988), Preface, p. 10.

[23] LEVINAS (1988), Conclusions, p. 280.

[24] LEVINAS (1988), pp. 178 and 191.

[25] LEVINAS (1988), p. 190.

[26] LEVINAS (1988), pp. 191 and 285.

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The third enters through proximity to the next, and justice is the moderation of a responsibility that continues to emerge from the face27 .

Faced with the tyranny of the political, Levinas's recourse is subjectivity: the "irreplaceable uniqueness of the self that stands against the State," and the rhetorical question of how not to introduce "the subjectivity of the self as the only possible source of goodness."28 It is, in another register, the same recourse as Bauman to the duty to resist and to the testimony of the few who resisted. Both place the source of morality outside social structures and see in these structures, especially organized ones, the place where it is silenced. Both, therefore, can only oppose to the organization that which the organization does not reach: the singular consciousness.

2.3 Faceless Responsibility

Bauman and Levinas do not exhaust the answers. Political philosophy and the theory of collective responsibility have, in recent decades, sought to establish the responsibility of those who act through organizations without considering their proximity, and three of these attempts directly address the problem.

Dennis Thompson gave the phenomenon that Bauman called floating responsibility the name by which it is known today: the problem of many hands. Because many employees contribute, in different ways, to the decisions and policies of a government, it becomes difficult, even in principle, to identify who is morally responsible for the results.29 Thompson's answer is not to abandon personal responsibility, but to reconstruct it with criteria of causality and volition adjusted to organizational life, so that neither hierarchy nor collectivity serves as a refuge; Mark Bovens developed the same line for complex organizations in general.30 The gain is real, but the question continues to be asked from the agent's perspective: what did he cause, what did he know, what could he have avoided? The side of those towards whom one acts remains without theory.

Christopher Kutz formulated a principle of complicity that dispenses with the causal difference of the isolated act: someone is responsible for what others do when they intentionally participate in the evil they commit or the harm they cause.31 Responsibility no longer depends on whether the act makes a difference, and this directly addresses the argument of insignificant acts. It depends, however, on a participatory intention, that is, on the agent understanding himself as part of a common undertaking. It is precisely this self-understanding that the division of labor, as Bauman described it, decomposes: the train driver does not see himself as a participant in an extermination, and nothing in his state of mind compels him to see himself that way.

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[27] LEVINAS (1974), chapter V, section 3, “Du dire au dit, ou la sagesse du désir”, where the entry of the third requires Comparison, measurement, and justice, without losing sight of responsibility for others as their origin.

[28] LEVINAS (1988), Conclusions, p. 280.

[29] THOMPSON (1980), pp. 905-906.

[30] BOVENS (1998), on the problem of many hands in complex organizations and models of Individual, hierarchical, and collective responsibility.

[31] KUTZ (2000), especially the formulation of the principle of complicity, which grounds responsibility in Intentional participation in collective actions, and not the causal difference of each contribution.

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Iris Marion Young went further in the direction of structure. Her model of social connection assigns responsibility to all those who, through their actions, contribute to structural processes that produce injustice, regardless of guilt or individualizable causal link, and was built in part in a critical dialogue with Arendt32. This responsibility needs neither a face nor intention. However, it has two characteristics that distance it from the problem posed here. It is prospective and political: it does not say that each person should be held accountable for what they did, but what everyone should do, together, to transform the structure. And it does not delimit: all those who participate in the processes share responsibility, and the circle of those responsible, like Levinas's third circle, tends to coincide with everyone. Mattias Gunnemyr has also shown that participation, as Young understands it, is neither necessary nor sufficient for the political responsibility she assigns to it33. In Young, "participating" designates the agent's contribution to the process that produces the harm. In *"Is Tomorrow Possible?",* the word designates something else: the position of those who live according to the conditions upon which the action falls. The difference in meaning is the whole difference in the argument.

2.4 The common boundary

Bauman's and Levinas's responses differ in almost everything — one is sociological, The other metaphysics; one measures proximity, the other refusal as a measure, they share a -, but premise. In both, the moral relationship is immediate. In Bauman, because it arises from proximity; in Levinas, because it arises from a presentation without intermediary. And in both, therefore, mediation is the place of loss: the organization, the institution, the "visible of the political" are what interrupt the relationship, and morality can only resist them from the outside.

It is this premise that makes Bauman's diagnosis inescapable. If the moral relationship is immediate, mediated action is morally deficient by nature, and the only possible ethics of distance would be an ethics that is not an ethics of anything. Responses that dispense with proximity escape the premise, but not the difficulty: they remain on the side of the agent, like Thompson's reconstruction; they reduce the relationship to the state of mind of the one who acts, like Kutz's participatory intention; or they extend it to all who contribute to a structure, like Young's social connection. The question can then be reformulated more precisely: is there a normative relationship that is not immediate—that passes through mediation, instead of being interrupted by it—that does not depend on the representation of the one who acts and that, at the same time, is delimited, that is, that speaks to whom, and not only to everyone?

[32] YOUNG (2011), in particular the distinction between the liability *model*
and the social connection model, and a critical reading of Arendt's distinction between guilt and responsibility.
[33] GUNNEMYR (2020), pp. 567-586.

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§ 3 — Another source: the normativity of participation

3.1 The starting point

Is tomorrow possible? Towards a new philosophy of normativity starts from a fact that has nothing to do with morality: we continually live off what we do not produce. The air, the water, the language in which we think, the currency with which we pay, the law according to which we know what is ours — “None of this is matter, and none of this was produced by those who live off it.”34 Technical capacity does not reduce this dependence; it reorganizes it and, frequently, deepens it.

Two passages from Book I are directly relevant to Bauman's problem. The first is the thesis that managing is not producing. Management organizes the use of what is not produced; it makes dependence more intelligible, not less. And it improves by dividing itself: “An administration becomes better by dividing itself […]. As the operation becomes more extensive, so does the portion of indispensable knowledge that is no longer in the mind of anyone participating in the decision.” Good administration, the book concludes, does not close the distance between the decision-maker and that on which the decision depends: “It organizes this distance, makes it bearable, and, by making it bearable, makes it greater.”35 The premise is the same as Weber's and, by another route, Bauman's: distance is not a pathology of the organization, but a product of its good functioning. The book does not extract from it a diagnosis of rationalization; it only extracts “a boundary that no efficiency crosses.”36

The second step is the distinction between conditions that merely favor a reality and those that constitute it. A condition is constitutive when, if removed, what remains is no longer the same form, and not merely the same form in worse circumstances: “Was it a condition of continuing, or a condition of being? Only the second constitutes.”37

3.2 Participate

Book II refers *to* a class of realities—a friendship, a living language, a university, a shared passage—that recognize each other through two [characteristics].
Joint properties: they survive the replacement of all their components and can cease with all of them present. “To participate means to exist by receiving that which is not produced by itself,” in a receiving in which “turning towards what is received is what the thing is, and not merely an activity that it performs.”38 Every participation has a term, a mode, and a structure, and can only be recognized by all three together.

Two clarifications from this definition are important for what follows. The first is that participation is not a compliment. The book acknowledges a participatory structure in a gang, and concludes: “Participation is not yet a compliment. It is merely the name of a particular form.”

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[34] DIETRICH, *Is tomorrow possible?* (forthcoming), chapter 1, p. 13.

[35] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 2, p. 24.

[36] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 2, no. 9, p. 22, about WEBER (1999).

[37] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 4, p. 49.

[38] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 8, p. 112.

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of existence."39 The error of a participation, when it exists, is not in participating, but in what it leaves to other participations that depend on the same common reality. The second is that participation is not measured by activity. The child who learns the language and the teacher who teaches it "occupy different places in the same participatory reality"; reception "does not constitute a deficiency of participation," but "one of its own modes of realization."40 Whoever only receives participates fully.

3.3 Before whom

The decisive step in Bauman's problem is in Chapter 11. The case is deliberately stripped down: someone alters, in an empty room, a line in a file on which others will depend. No one is present. The book asks before whom this action is taking place, and answers that the relationship with those who will depend on the file "did not begin when someone falsified it. It already existed. The alteration did not create it; it encountered it." The others "did not enter the action because of the consequences. They were already in it because of the position that thing occupied in their own participation."41

From there follow three theses that the architecture of Levinas and Bauman would not allow to be formulated.

The first is that the direction of the action does not depend on the agent's representation: "It may happen that he has never thought of anyone. He may even completely ignore who will one day depend on that condition. None of this alters the phenomenon. The direction does not come from his mood, but from the reality upon which he acted." And, in the most precise formulation: "The direction is of the action, and not of the intention; it is found in the thing as a condition of the participation of others, and not in the representation that the agent makes of them."42

The second is that the relationship is mediated, and that mediation does not weaken it: "Between the gesture and the people, the thing upon which one acted always remains. It is through it, and never over it, that the action reaches others." And: "mediation does not diminish the reality of the relationship; it describes it. […] The relationship does not happen despite the mediation. It happens through the mediation." 43 The book itself offers, among other examples, a purely bureaucratic act: "A service that erases a necessary distinction from its records acts, at that moment, only on words and forms. Even so, all those who tomorrow need this distinction will find themselves facing a reality different from the one they received."44

The third point is that the relationship does not depend on the encounter or proximity. The book states this explicitly—the relationship between the participants and the agent "is not born from the encounter, nor from physical proximity, nor from a previously established contract. It is born from the anteriority of the shared condition itself"—and it also says this against Levinas, in the only note where he is mentioned: "there, the ethical priority of the other is not founded on any

[39] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 8, p. 122-123.
[40] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 8, p. 126-127.
[41] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 11, p. 159-160.
[42] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 11, p. 160-161.
[43] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 11, p. 161-162.
[44] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 11, p. 162.

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It is a shared condition, and the relationship does not pass through any intermediate term; here, the other is only in the action because the thing upon which it acts already occupied a place in his participation. "With the condition removed, there is no purer relationship left: there is no relationship at all."45

Being in someone's presence does not yet mean owing them an answer. The book insists on this: "There can be a relationship without obligation, just as there can be closeness without responsibility."46 Chapter 12 shows that adding knowledge, power, foresight, and control to the person acting does not, in itself, produce a duty; it produces accountability, that is, the necessary condition for someone to be the recipient of a demand. “Knowledge shows before whom one stands; it does not explain why being thus before someone constitutes an obligation.”47

3.4 The assumed reason

It is at this point that the book does the only thing it asks of the reader. Having removed all the elements that could explain why someone should be held responsible—the damage, the complaint, the position, the rule, the promise, the benefit, the agent's own feelings—something still remains. The case is that of a cistern supplying water to several houses, repaired by someone who had no responsibility whatsoever, without anyone noticing. The repair is beneficial, and yet the person who did it cannot treat the history of this reorganization as exclusively their own matter: “The hand that acted was one; the condition under which it acted was never solely theirs.”48

This remainder is not demonstrated. It is assumed outright, as a rationale: “In reorganizing that in which others participate, the agent can no longer treat this reorganization as exclusively his own matter; he must answer to those whose position he has modified regarding what has been modified.”49 The book does not hide the risk of this choice: “Anyone who does not recognize this remainder—anyone who sees it only as an effect of reputation, habit, convenience, or as nothing relevant—may reject the book on this point.”50 But the rationale assumed has, in compensation, two properties that are important here. It is delimited: the response is limited “to what has been modified and does not extend arbitrarily in any direction.” And it does not depend on the agent’s state of mind: “The direction of the action does not arise from his feeling; it arises from the common condition upon which it has fallen and from the participation of those who continue to live from it.”51

3.5 The circle, the floor, permission and positions

Four subsequent developments complete the architecture, and each of them
This responds, without the book explicitly stating it, to a piece of Bauman's diagnosis.

The circle is found, not chosen. Chapter 15 compares the architecture with Scanlon's and observes that, if it were enough to be affected by a decision to be the recipient of it...

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45 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 14, p. 200, and chap. 11, no. 59, p. 161.
46 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 11, p. 165.
47 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 12, p. 168.
48 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 13, p. 179-182.
49 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 13, p. 193.
50 DIETRICH (in press), Introduction, p. 5.
51 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 13, p. 192 and 183.

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If there were no justification, the circle would be limitless; and any selection criterion brought in from outside—The most vulnerable, the closest—this makes the selection cease to be "discovered and become chosen." The alternative is for the selection to be drawn by the action itself: "It is not we who decide who belongs to the field of action. It is the action itself that, acting upon an objective condition, already delimits those whose participation in that condition has been reorganized."
[…] The distinction is not produced by the theory; it is recognized by it."52 The book adds a far-reaching caveat: this applies where the condition "allows itself to be described without dispute as to what it is and who participates in it"; where equally defensible descriptions diverge, judgment is suspended.53

The floor. The appropriate response follows the structure of the affected good. Where what has been altered is a constitutive condition, responding requires restoring it. And there is a limit below which no reorganization can be responded to: "One does not respond by destroying that which is precisely what the response is due to." The book calls this boundary *the floor ,* which "does not measure quality, utility, efficiency, or importance. It only measures the permanence of identity."54

Permission. Chapters 16 to 18 isolate a change that cannot be measured by losses. A path crossed by everyone receives a gate; the owner never locks it. Nothing is lost that a statistic records, and yet the form has changed: "Even if permission is never refused, a mediation that did not exist before now exists. What was participation has become permission."55 The same occurs with the enclosed spring whose water continues to be distributed equally: "Before, they depended on the spring. Now they depend on the will of the one who controls access to the spring. The water remains the same; participation has ceased to be."56 What matters is not the exercise, but the existence of a *faculty to grant or deny:* "When it comes into existence, even if it is never used, the structure of participation is no longer the same."57

The positions. Chapter 22 addresses the case where many act and no one, alone, reorganizes—the aquifer that descends beneath thousands of wells. The sum of actions does not produce an author: "What was added up were effects, and the effects, alone, never said who is responsible for them." But, where an established regime exists—channels, quotas, licenses—there are three distinct ways of being within the reorganization: whoever instituted it, whoever now holds the power to grant and deny, and whoever repeats the action that, added together, produces it. What the book says about whoever inherited the power is particularly relevant: he "received this function from another, did not institute it, never refused a single license, and truthfully says that none of it is his work." And yet, the rest "were not bound by the action: they followed the position"; the author of the due response "is defined by the place he occupies, not by the history he has."58

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[52] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 15, p. 211-212.
[53] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 15, p. 213.
[54] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 18, p. 264.
[55] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 16, p. 235.
[56] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 18, p. 259-260.
[57] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 17, p. 249.
[58] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 22, p. 304-307.

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As for those who merely repeat, Chapter 21 describes the point at which the gesture, “considered within the series of which it is a part, can no longer be described as irrelevant.”59

The book makes no mention of the Holocaust, nor Bauman, nor state violence. Its scenes are cisterns, trails, springs, and aquifers. That is precisely why the confrontation with Bauman is interesting: architecture was not designed to respond to him, and it remains to be seen whether it does.

§ 4 — The test: adiaphorization against the structure of the action

The three arrangements that, according to Bauman, render action morally indifferent share a common trait revealed in his formulation: all operate on what the agent perceives. The first places the consequences "beyond the reach of the moral impulse"; the second removes some others from the category of "potential faces"; the third fragments the human object so that "the opportunity to reunify the face does not occur." If the moral relationship lies in perception, all three arrangements suppress it. If it lies in the structure of the action, all three merely conceal it. It remains to be seen, arrangement by arrangement, what happens to the relationship of participation.

4.1 The distance

The first arrangement widens the distance between the action and its consequences. For Bauman, this is enough to negate the moral significance of the act, because morality obeys the "law of optical perspective".

In the architecture of participation, distance is something else. What separates the employee in the empty room from those to whom his line reaches is not an empty space that moral impulse cannot traverse; it is the very condition under which he acted—the functionalism, the profession, the legal status—and it is through this that the action reaches them. The length of the chain of intermediaries alters what the agent knows, and the book concedes that it alters it greatly: the division of labor, by construction, places indispensable knowledge outside the reach of any mind that participates in the decision. But knowledge, in the book, is not what constitutes the relationship. It “shows before whom it stands”; it does not create it.60 Therefore, the chain can be as long as desired without the relationship shrinking: it is not a function of distance, because it is not a function of vision.

This does not mean that distance is morally indifferent. It means that what it produces is ignorance, not an absence of relationship. And ignorance, in this framework, is a problem of accountability and knowledge, which is resolved in another way—
seeking to understand, listening to those on the outside—and not limiting the field of those before whom one acts. The book even goes so far as to say that the change that affects the participants may be the same change that removes the point from which it would be visible, and that “This does not put them outside the field of response.”61

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[59] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 21, no. 102, p. 298.
[60] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 12, p. 168.
[61] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 11, p. 163.

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4.2 Exclusion from the universe of obligation

The second arrangement is the most dangerous, and it is the one in which Bauman saw the greatest Nazi invention: making the humanity of the victims invisible by removing them from the universe of obligation. Fein's definition is, it should be noted, a definition by *recognition:* the universe of obligation is "the circle of people with a reciprocal obligation to protect each other whose bonds derive from their relationship with a deity or sacred source of authority."

Whoever controls recognition controls the circle. That is why it was enough for the State to define: according to Bauman, excluding Jews from the universe of obligation "was only necessary to deprive them of participation in the nation and community of the German State".62

Bauman's phrase uses the word *participation,* and uses it as if it were a granted status: to deprive someone of participation would be to withdraw recognition. In the architecture of participation, participation is not a granted status, and the circle of those before whom one acts is not drawn by recognition. The book shows this with the case of the company dissolved by judicial act, in which "belief remains whole; reality has ceased," and concludes that collective recognition, however important it may be, "is not what they consist of."63

Similarly, withdrawing recognition does not remove participation. German Jews in 1933 continued to speak the language, practice their professions, live in the cities, and own what they owned. The norm that defined them as "non-Aryan" did not remove them from these conditions; it altered their position within them.

This leads to a consequence that is perhaps the strongest point of the argument. In Fein's logic, the act of exclusion *removes* the victims from the circle; on the other side of the border, "moral evaluations are meaningless." In the logic of participation, the act of exclusion is itself a reorganization of the conditions in which the excluded participate—and is, therefore, precisely the act that draws the circle of those before whom one acts. The official who drafts the definition does not remove those defined from the field of their action; they place them within it. The more effective the exclusion, the more extensive the reorganization, and the more numerous those before whom it occurs.

The same can be seen in the sequence that Hilberg described and that Bauman read as "the logic of expulsion from the realm of moral duty": definition, dismissal and expropriation, concentration.64 Each stage presupposes the participation that it suppresses. One can only dismiss those who worked; one can only expropriate those who possessed; one can only concentrate those who inhabited.

The very materiality of exclusion is proof that there was an occupied place in the condition that it reorganizes. That which, in Fein's language, expels from the universe of obligation is, in the language of participation, the exact description of the object of the due response.

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62 BAUMAN (1998), chap. 1, section "The social production of moral invisibility"; FEIN (1979), p. 4.

63 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 8, p. 105.

64 BAUMAN (1998), chapter 7, section "Social suppression of moral responsibility". The sequence is the one that organizes HILBERG (1961).

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4.3 The dismembered face and technical responsibility

The third arrangement decomposes the human object into functional traits—a number, a transport category, a budget item—so that no one, at any point in the chain, finds themselves facing a whole person. Corresponding to this is the substitution of moral responsibility by technique, which Bauman described as the forgetting that action is a means to something beyond itself: “the bureaucratic act itself becomes an end in itself.”65

The architecture of participation does not need to reunify the face, because the relationship it describes never passed through it. What it demands is something else: that the condition upon which one acts be described as what it is—the condition in which others participate—and not merely as the matter of a task. The book calls the inverse operation a *change of register ,* whereby a good comes to be described in the vocabulary of another: the water that one participated in becomes “something that one receives from whoever administers it,” and the description “is already done in the new register.”66 Technical responsibility is precisely a change of register: the transport of people described as the management of rolling stock, death described as disinfection.

In contrast, architecture does not oppose a feeling, but a demand for description: the question of what an action reorganizes cannot be answered by simply recording the task.

And the reasoning adopted strikes at the heart of technical responsibility. This consists of treating the act as a matter closed in its own correctness—well executed, according to the rule, within competence. The reasoning adopted is precisely the impossibility of doing this: whoever reorganizes a condition in which others participate “can no longer treat this reorganization as exclusively their own matter.” The book carefully distinguishes between the legitimacy of the action and the structure of the action: “One thing is the legitimacy of the action; another is the impossibility of treating, after acting, what has been done as exclusively one’s own matter. The unilateral nature of the decision does not transform the structure of the action into a private one.”67 A legitimate order, a regular competence, a technically impeccable task do not close the act upon itself.

4.4 Floating liability

Bauman added to the three arrangements an effect that makes them almost invulnerable: “floating” responsibility. Each employee acts on behalf of another; the one who decides does not execute; the one who executes does not decide. “One could say that the organization as a whole is an instrument for eliminating responsibility.”68 The executors said it in no uncertain terms: Ohlendorf declared himself “a cog in a relatively low position within a large machine.”69

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[65] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 4, section “Effects of the hierarchical and functional division of labor”.

[66] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 18, p. 260-261.

[67] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 13, p. 186.

[68] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 6, section “Floating Responsibility”.

[69] BAUMAN (1998), chapter 1, section “The social production of moral indifference”.

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Arendt heard the same argument in Jerusalem and showed why it doesn't hold up in a court of law: the cog theory can describe a system, but before a judge, each cog becomes a person again, and the question becomes why they accepted being a cog, or continued to be one.70 Arendt's answer, however, resorts to personal judgment and refusal, that is, to the same place—singular consciousness—where Bauman and Levinas had placed their resistance. A reason is lacking that doesn't depend on the functionary having thought.

The answer from architecture is in Chapter 22, and it is all the more significant as the chapter was written for aquifers, not bureaucracies. The argument of the cog in the machine has two forms. In the first, the agent says that his gesture, in isolation, does not produce the result. The book concedes the premise—the sum of gestures does not produce an author—and rejects the conclusion by another route: there is a point at which the gesture, “considered in the series of which it is a part,” can no longer be described as irrelevant, and from that point on, whoever repeats it “can no longer claim to be indifferent” to the reorganization.71 The book does not offer a number for this point and declares that there is no benchmark to be set; but it also declares that not knowing where the boundary is “is not a license to treat as indifferent again that whose irrelevance has already begun to unravel.”72

In the second form, the agent says that he instituted nothing, that he only occupies a function that he received, and that he never refused anything. It is the argument of the heir to the signature, and the book formulates it with the same honesty with which it refutes it: whoever signs the licenses “truthfully says that none of that is his work.” The answer is that the due response is not tied to the gesture, but to the position: whoever holds the power to grant and deny occupies the place on which the granting or refusal depends, and occupies it “by holding it,” even without exercising it.73
Responsibility doesn't fluctuate because it's not linked to intention or historical authorship, which can always be shifted. It's linked to the place someone occupies in each situation.
moment.

The test result can be stated in one sentence. The three arrangements of adiaphorization and the Floating responsibility each suppresses a condition of moral *perception :* the visibility of consequences, the recognition of the other as the recipient, the integrity of the face, the authorship of the act. None of them suppresses the relationship that the architecture of participation describes, because this relationship does not depend on any of these conditions. Organized distance hides from the actor from whom he acts; it does not place him before anyone less.

§ 5 — Where to brake

A diagnosis of invulnerability is not yet a deterrent. To say that the moral relationship subsists at a distance is to say that the employee cannot rightfully claim that he had nothing to do with it.

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[70] ARENDT (2004), “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship”, on the “theory of the machinery” and its irrelevance before a court; see also ARENDT (1999), Postscript.

[71] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 21, no. 102, p. 298, and chap. 22, p. 314.

[72] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 21, p. 301.

[73] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 22, p. 305-306.

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It has to do with that; it's not about saying when and how it should have stopped. The architecture of participation is not a decision-making procedure, and the book repeats this: “It is foundational, not legislative.”74 But it identifies, in the process of mismanagement, three points where the appropriate response can be demanded before violence occurs. These are the places where the demand has a name and a recipient.

5.1 The first brake: when participation becomes permission

Chapter 17 shows that the decisive alteration of a common passage is not the day the gate is locked, but the day someone comes into existence with the power to lock it. “The gate that never closes has already instituted a power, and it is the power, not its exercise, that has altered participation.”75 The proper response, in this case, is not that the gate should always remain open—an unlocked gate retains the power—but that the power should cease to exist.

Viewed through this lens, the sequence Hilberg described has a first stage that is more precise than the “definition.” Before any dismissal, the definition can be described as the institution of a faculty: that of deciding, on a case-by-case basis, who would continue to practice a profession, attend a school, reside in a neighborhood, own property. What one participated in became something one depended on through authorization. In the book's formulation, “What was participation became permission,” and this happened “even though it is never used.”76 Hilberg's retrospective phrase — “the fate of European Jews was sealed” — here takes on a meaning that does not depend on what would come later. What was sealed that day was not a destiny; it was a form. And the alteration of the form was already under the assumed reason, because it already reorganized the condition in which others participated.

The first obstacle, therefore, is this: the institution of a power to grant or deny what others exercised through participation is, in itself, a reorganization that demands a response, and the appropriate response is its extinction. It is not necessary to wait for the first refusal, nor for the first victim, for the demand to exist and have recipients—those who instituted the power and, above all, those who hold it. The subsequent stages of the process, which Bauman described as successive steps of distancing, are, in this reading, the progressive conversion of participation into permission and, finally, of permission into nothing.

5.2 The second brake: the boundary of irrelevance

Lachs' argument about "insignificant acts" is the argument of someone who repeats things. Each train timetable, each typed list, each stamp is, in isolation, incapable of producing the result. The book fully concedes this. Derek Parfit has shown that treating the minute or imperceptible effects of a gesture as morally null is one of the “errors of moral mathematics,” and that a thousand individually imperceptible contributions can...

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[74] DIETRICH (in press), Introduction, p. 5.

[75] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 17, no. 88, p. 250.

[76] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 16, p. 235, and chap. 17, p. 249.

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to add torture77. Parfit's answer, however, is aggregative: the gesture counts for the part it plays in a total effect, and therefore continues to depend on the result. What the book adds is a boundary prior to any result: the point at which it ceases to be *honest* to describe the gesture as irrelevant, because it can no longer be considered except "in the series of which it is a part".78 This boundary is not a number, not a marker, and not a rule of precaution, and the book refuses to offer any of the three. But it has a practical consequence: whoever repeats a gesture whose series is already known cannot invoke the insignificance of the isolated gesture. The question that the book teaches us to ask — "when does it cease to be honest to treat a reorganization as irrelevant?" — is a question that any employee can ask at their own desk.79

5.3 The third brake: the refusal to consider the matter closed.

The third restraint is the simplest and most demanding. Technical responsibility confines the act to its own correctness. The assumed reason reopens it: whoever reorganized a condition in which others participate must answer to them "for what was modified." The requirement is delimited—the employee is not asked to answer for everything, but for what their action altered—and it is precisely this delimitation that makes it applicable to an organization. An infinite responsibility cannot be distributed among positions; responsibility for what is reorganized can.

The floor gives this requirement an absolute limit. There are reorganizations that no answer can reach, because they destroy the very thing to which the answer would be due.
Extermination is the extreme case: it not only reorganizes the condition of others, but eliminates those to whom one should be accountable. One can describe the genocidal project, in this language, as the attempt to make a reorganization of common conditions an exclusively personal matter, suppressing its intended recipients. Architecture shows why this attempt fails even when it is successful on the ground: the conditions that were reorganized—language, the city, science, the law in which the dead participated—

They continue to be participated in by others, by the survivors and by those yet to come, and it is before them that the reorganization continues to take place. What a destroyed participation leaves to others is, in the vocabulary of Chapter 9, the impoverishment of the commons; and this impoverishment, unlike that of the victims, cannot be removed from the field.

§ 6 — Objections and limitations

6.1 The reason may be refused.

The first objection is the most serious, and the book anticipates it. The rationale behind the entire architecture is assumed, not demonstrated; anyone who does not recognize the rest "may refuse the

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77 PARFIT (1984), chapter 3, "Five mistakes in moral mathematics", especially the case of torturers. harmless *(Harmless Torturers).*

78 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 21, no. 102, p. 298.

79 DIETRICH (in press), chap. 21, p. 299.

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"The book at this point." The fanatic who considers extermination a duty, and not a crime, will not be stopped by it.

The objection is valid. But it determines the scope of the argument rather than invalidating it. The evil that Bauman described was not, for the most part, that of the fanatic. It was that of “normal people” who did not need antisemitic convictions to do their part, and who felt exempt from accountability because distance, rules, and competence gave them reasons to do so. The architecture of participation does not convert fanatics; it removes from these officials the reasons with which they absolved themselves. That the act was far away, that they saw no one, that the order was legitimate, that the gesture was insignificant, that the function was inherited—each of these claims is true as far as the agent knew or did, and none of them places him outside the realm of those before whom he acted. This is no small matter, if the evil in question is that which feeds on these claims.

6.2 Suspension can be explored

The second objection is internal to the architecture. The book suspends judgment where equally defensible descriptions of the condition and the participants yield different answers. Could a sufficiently organized power not produce rival descriptions—the “community of the people” as the true common condition, those defined as strangers to it—and force the suspension precisely where it suits them?

The book does not discuss this possibility, and it must be confronted. The answer lies in two elements it provides. The first is that the suspension requires *equally defensible descriptions,* obtained through a search that attempts to describe the form “in another way—wider, narrower, or taking another stretch of time”; and the book warns that “Many disputes that present themselves in this way are disputes of value in disguise.”80 The second is what was seen regarding the universe of obligation: the measures of exclusion presuppose the participation they suppress. The Nazi redescription did not dispute that Jews spoke German, practiced professions, owned property, and inhabited cities; it disputed whether *they should.* It is a dispute of value, not of description. Where exclusion itself is proof of participation, there is no descriptive rival that architecture should take seriously.

This does not eliminate the possibility of cases in which the descriptive dispute is genuine, and in which the architecture suspends. But the suspension, in these cases, is not a license; the book describes it as the recognition that the structure of the case cannot be established by one person alone, and points out, for these cases, the need to listen to those on the outside.81

6.3 What the book doesn't say

The third objection concerns fidelity: architecture is applied here to an object that the book does not address. The book does not speak of orders, obedience, or chains of command; the three positions in Chapter 22 were formulated for licensing regimes over water. And the book leaves open a question that a reader of the Holocaust cannot ignore: faced with a

[80] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 10, p. 154-156.

[81] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 19, p. 284, and chap. 11, p. 163-164.

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form whose identity consisted in keeping others below the floor, expressly states that “none of this establishes that undoing is due”.82

Both reservations are valid. Applying the three positions to bureaucratic chains is an extension, not an interpretation, of the book; it is justified because the criterion of Chapter 22—the power to grant and deny, defined by the position and not by authorship—does not depend on the type of good in question. As for the form that keeps others below the floor, the question
The general situation can remain open. The extermination apparatus is not a way of *keeping* others below the bottom as a contingent trait of a participation that could exist without it; it is the reorganization itself, and the response due from those who institute, control, or repeat it is already given by the bottom: one does not respond by destroying that to which the response is due.

6.4 Evil without an author

The fourth objection limits the scope of the entire argument. Chapter 22 acknowledges that, where there is no imputable act or titular position, the architecture “recognizes the loss but does not identify who is responsible.”83 Part of what is now called modern evil—the losses produced by markets, by aggregations of conduct without an established regime, by the technology that Bauman feared would escape control—falls into this gap. The Holocaust does not fall into this gap: it had acts, norms, faculties, and titulars. The argument therefore applies to mismanaged evil, not to evil without an administrator; the boundary was drawn by the book and remains where it is.

6.5 Measuring the response

The fifth objection is that architecture dictates to whom one acts and what one cannot do, but it doesn't say what one should do above the floor. This is true, and the book states it: “defining the floor is not measuring the room.”84 For Bauman's problem, however, this modesty is not a flaw. What failed in the offices he described was not the fine measure of the appropriate response; it was the recognition that there was someone to whom one had to respond. The book argues, in conclusion, that knowing what cannot happen does not require knowing what should happen, and reminds us that the abolition of slavery did not wait for a finished image of a just society.85

Conclusion

Bauman showed that modern evil doesn't primarily need hatred, but distance, and that modern organization produces distance as it produces efficiency: by construction. Drawing on Levinas, he located the source of morality in proximity to the other and concluded, coherently, that morality shrinks as distance grows. He therefore called for an ethics of distance and doubted that it was possible. The doubt was the

[82] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 18, p. 270.
[83] DIETRICH (in press), chap. 22, p. 310.
[84] DIETRICH (in press), Introduction, p. 6.
[85] DIETRICH (in press), Conclusion, pp. 321-322.

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A direct consequence of the chosen source: an ethic that resists organization cannot draw its strength from that which organization suppresses.

Levinas offered a deeper responsibility than Bauman's sociological proximity, one that precedes knowledge and intention. But this responsibility arises from the face, in a relationship that does not pass through any middle ground, and Levinas himself needed a third party to introduce comparison and justice. Between the face and the institution, its architecture offers no criterion for determining before whom the one who acts stands.
through a chain of mediations. Theories of faceless responsibility, in turn, either remain stuck on what the agent caused and intended, or widen the circle to include everyone.

The philosophy of normativity developed in **Is Tomorrow Possible?** was built with other materials—cisterns, trails, springs, aquifers—and, tested against Bauman's diagnosis, provides what was lacking in both responses. It locates the normative relationship in the common condition upon which the action falls, and not in the encounter; therefore, the relationship passes through mediation, instead of being interrupted by it. It makes the direction of the action independent of the agent's representation; therefore, the invisibility of the consequences hides the relationship without suppressing it. It makes the circle of those before whom one acts be drawn by the reorganized condition, and not by recognition; therefore, the act that excludes someone from the universe of obligation is, itself, what places them before the one who excludes. And it links the due response to positions, and not to intentions or authorship; therefore, responsibility does not fluctuate.

Hence the three checks and balances. The institution of a faculty to grant or deny what others exercised through participation is already a reorganization under the assumed reason, and the proper response is its extinction, before any refusal. The repeated gesture ceases to be described as irrelevant when it can only be considered within the series of which it is a part. And no competence, order, or technical correctness closes in on itself the act that reorganized a condition in which others participate.

The argument has limits. The reason that sustains it is assumed and can be rejected; it does not deter the fanatic, but rather removes the reasons with which the normal employee absolves himself. Where genuinely rival descriptions dispute what a condition is and who participates in it, the architecture suspends. Where there is no imputable act nor titular position, it recognizes the loss and does not individualize who is responsible. And it does not measure the response above the floor.

The ethics of distance that Bauman deemed perhaps impractical need not be different from any known morality. It only needs a source that is not in the eye. If the moral relationship lies in the structure of the action—in the condition it reorganizes and in the participation of those who live it—the employee in the empty room was already, in writing his line, in front of all those it would reach. The distance that modernity has organized has not distanced him from them. It has only prevented him from seeing them.

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