



Nobody *Wants* to be Good: An Ethological Background for Lévinas's Ethics

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Abstract

The title of this paper recalls a well-known statement by Emanuel Lévinas, to which we will return below. However, what does it mean to be *good* – to be a *good* friend, a *good* citizen, a *good* husband, etc.? Regardless of individual qualities, such as strength, intelligence, docility, or others, I believe that being *good* basically means conforming one's conduct to the fundamental rules that define social relationships in that particular social context. Obviously, this assertion needs to be deepened, if it is not to be resolved into a banal tautology. It is precisely with this in mind that I will begin my exposition by starting with a simple description of the systems of rules that govern human relationships. Secondly, I will attempt to set out some results achieved by comparative ethology in the field of social behaviour. I will finally attempt to place certain aspects of E. Lévinas's ethical thought against this briefly outlined background. This, in the conviction that the Lithuanian philosopher's words find accurate confirmation in the results of ethological research, and that the convergence of distant and independent points of view is an important validation of the reliability of the results.

Keywords

Others; Relationship; Responsibility; Ethics; Instinct

1. Rules and Relationships

In our everyday lives, we have to deal with an infinity of rules. We are all embedded in a plurality of orders, more or less complex – States, Churches, village traditions, family rules, etc. – and all of them are articulated in rules, in turn. Sometimes, these may be shared, but more often they are respected almost out of inertia, and sometimes even suffered, since they are considered unjust or contrary to the interests towards which we would like to direct our lives. Why, then, do we – mostly – respect them? The fact that, already in the first years of our lives, we are confronted with rules, and feel obliged to observe them, confirms that this tendency is not a consequence of thoughtful sharing. Even as children, we feel forced to obey rules of conduct of which we are not able at all to assess the inspiring principles, the content, the purpose – let us think of parental prohibitions, of the teacher's directives or commands, and so on. Why do we obey? The “you must” that certain words resonate within the conscience of very young children or pupils cannot even be traced back to particular personal qualities of the father, mother, teacher – qualities that the recipient of the precept is not yet able to assess. Rather, obedience derives from the simple circumstance that certain words come from people who occupy a precise social role in the eyes of the child.

A similar reasoning can also be applied to certain forms of openness towards the other, linked to other types of relationships – that between the office manager and the employee, the sergeant and the recruit, between colleagues, neighbours, etc. There exists in human beings – and not only in them – an instinctive capacity to perceive and distinguish the different roles that compete with each one, at certain times. This capacity manifests itself in an

incredibly precocious manner and leads us to consider certain behaviours as due precisely as a consequence of the role we and those with whom we enter into relation occupy. In individual development, «there are sensitive periods in which certain basic ethical and aesthetic attitudes become fixated as an imprinting» (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1996). We can say that in inter-subjective relations there is a component based on the implicit, unintended, unlearned assumption of belonging to a certain group, to a certain organisation, which entails the equally unintended assumption that certain behaviours are dutiful in relation to the considered structure and the place we occupy within it. In common parlance, it is said that we must behave befitting our social position. We are social animals, born with the vocation to live in groups. By virtue of this primordial vocation, even prior to any individual, individual human relationships must always be placed in the web of the particular social context in which they take place. Indeed, each actor plays his part, which only makes sense if included in the overall plot, the beginning and end of which does not need to be understood at all – and often it is not even possible to do so.

This congenital vocation of humans to live in groups – which is the starting point of my argumentative journey – may not seem very consonant with our pride as *homines sapientes*. Nevertheless, if we think about it, it is not so. We must not believe that this quality clashes with our other so-called superior qualities, as a burden on our free intelligence, almost a sign of a still incomplete evolutionary development. On the contrary, this pre-disposition of ours seems almost to have been designed on purpose to ensure that the complex machine of living together works at its fullest, reducing, as far as possible, the dangers both for those who drive it and for those who come across its path. In other words, not only the social group benefits from it: the individuals that make it up are mutually benefited and protected by it, as well. The simple observation that we behave like the other members of the group behave – or in accordance with their expectations – gives each of us an absolutely unique sense of confidence. Sometimes, the approval of those around us is an excellent yardstick to judge the validity of what we are doing.

Probably, the ego's first step consists in recognising itself «through that very simple phrase – perhaps the simplest of all –, which is formed by precisely the simplest nominal syntagma, the personal pronoun “I”, and by – once again – the simplest verbal syntagma, the verb “to be” in the first person singular of the present indicative: “I am”. The “I” posits itself when it says: “I am”» (D. Corradini Broussard, 1993). Yet, in order to avoid being enclosed in a cage, «in its sidereal solitude» (D. Corradini Broussard, 1993), the ego needs a further step: to recognise – and to be recognised by – others and to enter into a relationship with them. This is an original, vital, natural need of the ego. However, if responding to the calls of living together is immediate and natural, so it is the activation of certain models of interpersonal conduct. These socially accepted models end up being considered obvious and taken for granted – even when, if it depended exclusively on us, we would prefer to make different choices and implement other behaviours. In the end, this may also be the case: given their prevalence and stability, certain forms of conduct end up being considered not only appropriate, but even “natural”, i.e. conforming to human nature itself and, on the contrary, conducts in contrast to the former are considered not only inadequate, but even “counter-natural”¹. As a result of what has been said, the fundamental rules that establish or prohibit certain paradigms of relationship with others have often been classified under the label of “natural law”. This definition has further complicated the facts of the matter, though, since it sparked endless debates on the existence or non-existence of these purported laws, their origin, validity, etc.

For many, the issues seem to have been resolved in the light of the belief in the primacy of reason and the consequent autonomy of morality both from the dictates of religion advanced in the name of some god, and from the physical laws that oversee nature. This conclusion is consistent with the idea of the lordship of the mankind over the world. Therefore, the so-called natural law would be definitively the result of the free rationality of the lord-of-the-world Man. Plus, natural law would be common to all social groups, precisely because it is elaborated according to the rules of the distinctive trait, the special privilege of the *homo* species. Someone has even surmised that, motivated or induced by this common distinguishing trait, human beings have signed an actual contract – or, at least, an implicit one – on which the common commitment to reciprocally respect the fundamental rules of coexistence is based.

Nonetheless, for many others – I refer mainly to the men of faith of the great monotheistic religions – it is hard to

¹ Jurists and philosophers of law express this need for organisation well with the words “*ubi societas, ibi jus*”, which Mortati translates and develops by arguing that a necessary element for the production of rules, specifically in the field of social relations, is the existence of «a group of subjects bound together by common interests requiring cooperation, or, at least, the coordination of those activities of individuals that are relevant to the satisfaction of those interests» (C. Mortati, *Istituzioni di diritto pubblico*, 2 voll., vol. I, CEDAM, Padua 1969, p. 5, my trans.). However, some have sought to reverse the order, arguing that “*ubi jus, ibi societas*”, thereby emphasising a primarily logical priority of the existence of rules over the existence of an organised group. It would not be the rules that would come into existence in the context of a society, but rather the latter that would come into existence by virtue of the existence of rules.

think that this natural law does not come from the divinity. On this point, the Bible is very explicit: the source of all commands, all laws and rules that men must put into practice is God, who also provides a precise exposition of the preceptive content of these rules:

«You shall not murder;

You shall not commit adultery;

You shall not steal;

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor;

You are not to covet your neighbor's house. You are not to covet your neighbor's wife, his male or female servant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor»².

However, even on this front, positions have diverged profoundly. Has some divinity imposed certain rules on us because they conform to his supreme reason, or just because she has unquestionably so willed? In the first case, considering that human reason is an opaque and narrow mirror of divine reason, there might still be room to root laws in an abstract and generic principle of rationality. In the second case, good actions and bad actions would not differ from each other, except for the fact that the former are those that the god(s) wanted to command us, and the latter those that they wanted to forbid us. By the same token, murder, theft, betrayal would cease to be bad actions, if the divinity so willed. On these premises, there is no longer room for the «conception of a rational foundation of the law. Of course, it does not derive its validity from being laid down by a temporal sovereign – by the State, in short. However, an act of will – the divine will – is at its foundation, not reason [...] his law is not valid because it is rational, but exclusively because it is willed by her [the divine, *note of the Author*]» (G. Fassò, 2001).

Seeking different paths, other men of thought have asserted that obedience to certain rules depends, essentially, on an individual utilitarian calculation. It does not have to be pondered and evaluated every single time, since certain conducts become almost unconscious in time, fixed by habit and tradition. It is necessary «to cast doubt on the legitimacy of any imputation in the field of ethics. Traced back to its historical substratum, the association between will and guilt sheds light on the dependence – which precedes it and characterises the entire Western tradition – of ethics on law, of any reflection concerning the good on the need to punish» (A. Brunori, 2024). Therefore, we no longer have law as an “ethical minimum” here, but rather ethics and law as instruments of power. The negative evaluation of an action is not the justification for its punishment but, on the contrary, the need to prevent and punish that action – insofar as it is detrimental to dominant interests – suggests the invention of a free will of the agent, without which repression would appear unjustified: «The court of reason, to use the bleak image of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is exactly like the one Kafka will invoke, an “invisible court”: its judgments are formulated in the name of a law that does not let itself to be known except through the punishments meted out in its name» (A. Brunori, 2024).

Are we to conclude that there is no hope left of finding a solid foundation for these rules, then – a foundation not bound to the various cultural moods or to the interests of a few? No hope of understanding their genesis and evolution? Maybe. However, it is still worth trying a different path before giving up.

2. The Instinct for Goodness

In order to understand human beings in their complexity, we should first of all consider that they contain within themselves «all the simpler systems in the evolution of life, because it is out of these that the human being has been built up and has proceeded. In this sense they are present in him» (J. Moltmann, 1993). Therefore, it is necessary to consider man in the natural world within which he appeared, grew up, and evolved.

In some animal species, the relationships between individuals are absolutely impersonal: individuals belonging to such species are completely anonymous and interchangeable with each other. None of them distinguishes from one another the co-specimens they come across. But for many other species – among them, the human one – things do not work this way: individuals recognise each other. This recognition acts as a selective criterion for activating or

² *Exodus*, 20, 1-26. In addition to setting out substantive law, i.e. rules of conduct, the Bible also sets out an elementary system of procedural law. In other words, it describes how to proceed in the event that someone does not comply with the rules or when there is a dispute about their interpretation and application. In fact, addressing the people gathered across the river Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses is said to have uttered these words: «How can I alone bear the load and burden of you and your strife? [...] So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you, leaders of thousands and of hundreds, of fifties and of tens, and officers for your tribes. Then I charged your judges at that time, saying, “Hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow countryman, or the alien who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God’s. The case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it”». *Deuteronomy* 1, 12-1.

deactivating a whole series of behaviours: in some cases, it gives free rein to the aggressive impulse; in some other cases, it blocks or transfers aggression elsewhere; sometimes, it goes further, leading to behaviours of respect, care, dedication, etc. In these cases, recognition leads the subject involved to behave in a way in which he or she would never behave in the regards of strangers, such as, for example, staying close to the others, even when the environmental situation would be such as to trigger the escape instinct. We can say that the group

is thus characterized by the fact that, like the anonymous crowd, it is held together by reactions elicited by one member in another, but in contrast to the impersonal social order, the attachment reactions are inseparably linked with the individualities of group members. [...] it is a prerequisite of group formation that individual animals should be capable of reacting selectively to the individuality of every other member [...] in all possible conditions of life (K. Lorenz, 2002).

Precisely because we are a social species of the latter type, mother nature, or whoever for that matter, over thousands of years of evolution³, has endowed us with innate, instinctive behaviours that serve to mark out social relations. In doing so, they ensure the chances of our individual survival, of the survival of the group to which we belong and, ultimately, of the survival of our species.

Instinctive behaviour patterns represent «a phylogenetic phenomenon laying down inviolable laws which the social behaviour of many higher animals obeys much in the same way as the behaviour of civilized man obeys his most sacred customs» (K. Lorenz, 2002). The backbone of this very special set of rules of conduct consists of the basic instincts: hunger, fear, reproduction, etc. Starting from these, in the course of evolution, many other patterns of behaviour were formed, which then came to constitute true independent instincts, with respect to the former or with respect to the combinations between them, from which – or in relation to which – they arose. The formation of these new instincts is predominantly linked to the random mechanism of mutation. Thus, they are rewarded or condemned to disappear according to the mechanism of natural selection, i.e. in the perspective of a better adaptability to the environment and of a better preservation of the species. Once selective pressure has rewarded some of these behavioural modules, they become part of the set of instincts, with equal dignity to the others, «dictat[ing] to the organism their own "Thou shalt" as irresistible as any of the allegedly irresistible drives of hunger, fear or sex» (K. Lorenz, 2002).

Just above, I used the expression “predominantly” since, in effect, the assumption that mutation-selection automatism is the sole engine of evolution, and thus the sole matrix of fundamental rules of conduct, is a simplification. Actually,

in spite of its almost unlimited capacity, the trial-and-success method of the genome would not in itself be sufficient to maintain living systems in a continuous state of adaptedness that would guarantee their survival. The cognitive mechanism of the genome is unable to cope with any rapid change in the environment, because it cannot “know” anything about the result of any of its experiments until the passage of at least a generation. Thus it can only produce adaptations to environmental parameters which will remain reasonably constant over a period of time (K. Lorenz, 1978).

First, the fact that every living organism is able to gather from the world information that is indispensable or useful for its survival through its sensory apparatus must be put in the right light. This information can be used right away, although – of course – it cannot be acquired by the species in a definitive form, i.e. it cannot be stored in the genome. Examples of these learning mechanisms include excitability, phobic reaction, topical reaction, etc (K. Lorenz, 2002). But the latest discoveries and hypotheses formulated by epigenetics are even more interesting. In the light of them, we can justifiably think that even the ways in which the genes themselves function are not only mutable as a result of random mutations, but can also change in response to particular messages from the environment. In this sense, it can be said that the genome responds to external stimuli and expresses itself on them. In other words, the genome is capable of interacting with the environment, of modifying some of its functions in response to stimuli or data from outside, without having to go through the long procedure of random mutations and across the selective advantage offered by some of these mutations over others. These expressions or responses of the genome exclude true mutations, since they are rather articulated in particular modulations of the genetic heritage. We could say that the single words of the genetic tale remain the same, whilst the intonation and punctuation of speech change.

Thus, moving along the axes of the basic instincts, for the most part, our social relations behaviour is arranged and

³ «Evolution is a world we use to describe changes in organisms due to the interaction of hereditary variation, superabundance, environmental change, and time. Evolution has neither memory nor foresight. It has no scheme, design or plan» (H. Gee, *The Accidental Species. Misunderstandings of Human Evolution*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 2013, p. x).

implemented – which is, activated and deactivated – through the stimulus-reaction mechanism. Therefore, we defend ourselves, those connected to us and our territory with aggressive manifestations towards those we perceive as enemies, but we are naturally capable of blocking or directing this aggression towards false targets, if the abstractly invasive or aggressive behaviour comes from one we recognise as our fellow human being. In this way, as we shall see, the impulse to kill is inhibited among those belonging to the same group.

A similar argument can be made about respect and/or obedience towards those who occupy a role to which a certain authority is attached. «Given the conditions and circumstances of the oldest hunting and gathering groups, the organization of human society would not have been much more complicated than that, say, of a wolf pack, a chimpanzee horde, an elementary school class. [...] in these groups a clear rank order among the individuals does in fact exist» (K. Lorenz, 1987). Obedience and submission, first to the father, then to the *pater familias*, then to the head-tribe, represents a virtue in the sense just clarified, i.e. an advantage for the group. This said, «it is noticeable that certain virtues prevail throughout the whole spectrum of cultures [...] These values held in common could, of course, result wholly from parallel cultural developments. But for obedience to authority there is experimental evidence pointing to the probability that this is a disposition innate to human beings» (I. Eibl, 1996).

The sense of belonging to the group within which one lives has its deepest roots in instinctively based behavioural patterns, as well. When a threat arises from outside, the individuals in the group take sides, willing to fight for the safety of their group and even sacrifice their own lives. This mechanism of the collective call to arms unfolds through a number of interconnected behavioural modules as in a chain reaction, resulting in the archaic emotion of the sacred thrill of enthusiasm. The analysis could also continue with regard to other conducts considered morally positive. However, in conclusion, we can reasonably state that there are certainly innate rules that guide our behaviour in relation to others.

What about our revered reason, of which we are (justifiably) proud, then? Some claim that «there is nothing special about being human, any more than there is anything special about being a guinea pig or a geranium. This insight should allow you see the world afresh, and marvel at each and every creature as it is, for its innate wonder and uniqueness»⁴. There is some truth in this, but in my opinion we cannot fail to recognise that, in the human species, phylogenetic development has, at a certain point, made a fundamental qualitative leap. This is the appearance of conceptual thinking or – to use the language of ethologists – the appearance of «the human mind, brought into existence through conceptual thinking, syntactic speech and the heritability of traditional knowledge made possible by speech»⁵. In other words, in human beings, alongside the ability to feel inner experiences – the soul – which is roughly similar to that of many other living species, there are also intelligence and culture – the spirit – which are, according to many, our exclusive prerogative⁶. In short, the parliament of instincts is not the only apparatus that oversees the formation of the rules of our actions and that is capable of inducing us to obey them. This fact is by no means without important consequences. Identifying a sure criterion to distinguish instinctive rules of conduct from those of cultural origin is not easy. Two criteria are characterized by the smallest margins of error: the spatial criterion, on the one hand, which is based on the almost general diffusion of certain rules, that are found in the most disparate cultures, and the temporal criterion, on the other hand, which is based on the fixity or the considerable slowness of the modifications of the rules over time. In essence, rules that are generally widespread and stable – or relatively stable – over time will most likely have to be considered of phylogenetic origin; rules that are typical of one or a few cultures and very changeable over time will most likely have to be considered of cultural origin.

From these very observations, an unavoidable problem can be deduced. On the one hand, instinctive rules, which change through phylogenetic evolution, are subject to very slow updates, resulting from the typical mechanism of evolution, namely mutation and selection. On the other hand, rational rules, which change through cultural evolution, evolve with increasing speed, adapting to changes in interests, customs, and reference values, and reacting to them, in turn. This growing speed gap may represent a danger to the future of mankind and his environment. This aspect of the problem, although of fundamental theoretical and practical importance, cannot be addressed here. I will merely observe that if natural rules were, by definition, perfectly capable of regulating the social life of men endowed with natural capacities and instruments, they now appear insufficient to guarantee the survival of men, whose rhythms, capacities and instruments have become infinitely more powerful – so much so that they can assume, to use J.

⁴ H. Gee, *The Accidental Species*, cit., p. xi.

⁵ K. Lorenz, *The Waning of Humaneness*, cit., p. 123.

⁶ The topic is currently the subject of lively debate. There is a growing conviction that those commonly held to be identifying traits of human intelligence – and thus of human superiority – e.g., the conception and manufacture of tools, the ability to plan, language, the ability to transmit information, etc., are actually not our privilege at all, but also common to many other animal species. See H. Gee, *The Accidental Species*, cit.

Moltmann's language, an eschatological dimension.

The rapidity with which the human mind changes and with which the human, through his technology, makes his own world into something completely different from what, just a short while ago, it was, is so great that, for all practical purposes, the pace of evolutionary development, when compared to it, is standing dead still. Since the emergence of human culture the human soul has remained essentially the same; it is not astonishing then that culture very often makes unfulfillable demands on the soul.⁷

3. E. Lévinas's Ethics

Precisely within this framework and from this angle, we will now try to consider some aspects of Emanuel Lévinas's ethical thought – aware that the one now adopted is a very particular perspective and therefore, inevitably reductive.

The identification of ethics with the gravitational centre of the philosopher's thought is a well-known fact (G. Mura, 1984). For Lévinas, ethics represents metaphysics itself, the authentic first philosophy. For this very reason, moral action is not to be considered as a possibility entrusted to the choice of the individual. On the contrary, it is rather to be placed within the constitutive structure of subjectivity. According to Lévinas, inter-human relations – and indeed, more generally, relationships with all that is other-than-self – originate from the movement the philosopher calls *separation*. It is to be understood as separation from anonymous being or – to use the already quoted words of D. Corradini – the first step of the ego. In a certain sense, this separation is the very structure of the ego, the background within which the subject defines itself in its interiority, and becomes aware of its own time, which cannot be identified with the time of history and historiographers.

According to the philosopher, this is the first movement of the journey. It is precisely from separation and separated interiority that the road and the gateway to otherness are opened.

We shall show further how separation or ipseity is produced primordially in the enjoyment of happiness, how in this enjoyment the separated being affirms an independence that owes nothing, neither dialectically nor logically, to the other which remains transcendent to it. [...] While the atheist independence of the separate being does not posit itself by opposition to the idea of infinity, it alone makes possible the relation denoted by this idea (E. Lévinas, 2003).

The imperialism of the Same, which in the history of Western thought had attempted to annul otherness within the prison of the Same, dies definitively – at least in Lévinas's thought. If «Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same» (E. Lévinas, 2003, p. 43); if «the possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same» (E. Lévinas, 2003, p. 38), then the human dimension of the transcendence of Others needs to be brought back to light and to the attention of philosophy. Here, it must be emphasised that, for the Lithuanian philosopher, this structural openness is not the result of reasoning: «the breach of totality is not an operation of thought, obtained by a simple distinguishing of terms that evoke one another or at least line up opposite one another» (E. Lévinas, 2003, p. 40). To breach the prison of totality, one must not appeal to reason, to its knowledge, its wisdom. For Lévinas, the breach of totality happens in the encounter with the other, in the face-to-face:

the encounter with the other, far from being consummated in the magic circle of interiority – as if the other were a kind of noema correlative to a noesis or a kind of alter ego in the phenomenological sense – implies a disruptive breakthrough on exteriority and is configured as an absolute novelty, irreducible to any dialectic of the Same. This means, in turn, that the overcoming of the totality of the barriers of immanence does not take place in the theoretical and conciliatory synthesis of philosophy, but rather in the non-synthesising, practical event of the face-to-face of human beings (E. Lévinas, 2003, p. 40).

Others is not com-prehended, that is, in no way can it be reduced or assimilated to the Same. Others exists before any understanding, even before any initiative, or power, or faculty of the Same: «if totality is the immanent and encompassing being of the ontological tradition, infinity is that transcendent and non-totalising reality that is the Other as face. The face [...] possesses, for Lévinas, an explicit ethical value. Indeed, it represents the structure of all possible ethics» (E. Lévinas, 2003, p. 254). «The epiphany of the face is ethical»⁸.

Therefore, ethics does not depend on reasoning, but on the subject's original openness to the other and to transcendence. «The Good is not presented to freedom; it has chosen me before I have chosen it. No one is good voluntarily. We can see the formal structure of nonfreedom in a subjectivity which does not have time to choose the

⁷ K. Lorenz, *The Waning of Humaneness*, cit., p. 124.

⁸ E. Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, cit., p. 199.

Good and thus is penetrated with its rays unbeknownst to itself. But subjectivity sees this nonfreedom redeemed, exceptionally, by the goodness of the Good» (A. Lingis, 2011).

Nor can the responsibility of the Same towards Others have originated in hypothetical commitments made, in some covenant, in some decision. «The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory," an "ulterior to every accomplishment," from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question "Where?" no longer holds» (A. Lingis, 2011, p. 10). The paradox of this responsibility lies in the fact that we find ourselves obliged without this obligation having been the object of deliberation, of free choice; on the contrary, it is activated in a very particular way

as though an order slipped into my consciousness like a thief, smuggled itself in, like an effect of one of Plato's wandering causes. But this is impossible in a consciousness. and clearly indicates that we are no longer in the element of consciousness [...] It is as though the first movement of responsibility could not consist in awaiting nor even in welcoming the order (which would still be a quasi activity), but consists in obeying this order before it is formulated. Or as though it were formulated before every possible present, in a past that shows itself in the present of obedience without being recalled, without coming from memory, being formulated by him who obeys in his very obedience (A. Lingis, 2011, p. 13).

Let us try to examine, by way of example, the ethical rule of not killing one's fellow human being.

It becomes evident that this rule belongs to all peoples of all times. «The interesting question is whether we observe this law solely by means of our reason or whether we are, in addition to this, following innate tendencies. If the latter should prove valid our hope for peaceful coexistence will have a firmer foundation than if compulsion and pure reason alone make us law-abiding»⁹. According to ethologists, as mentioned, we can reasonably believe that the latter hypothesis is the correct one: «human beings [...] possess a rich repertoire of gestures of appeasement and submission, most of them innate» (A. Lingis, 2011, p. 96). There are gazes, expressions, attitudes capable of blocking, or deflecting, or reframing the aggression of others. And it is interesting to point out that the most numerous and effective signals of appeasement and friendship come from the face – a particular expression of the eyes, crying, smiling, bowing the head. With a particular gaze or a smile we can approach – and are used to approach – complete strangers. With the same tools, we can avoid punishment, extinguish others' anger, block an aggressive intention directed against us. Of course, for all this to happen, I must be able to look my antagonist – be him real or presumed – in the face:

Two conditions for the effectiveness of submissive gestures of appeasement are that the victim of the attack should have sufficient time to transmit his signals of subjection, and that his assailant can in turn take note of them. [...] Our innate means of inhibiting attack are adjusted to our biological equipment. So long as men attacked one another with bare hands, then one of them could end by submitting and thus arouse pity. With the invention of the first weapon the situation was transformed overnight (A. Lingis, 2011, pp. 98-99).

According to Lévinas, the manifestation of Other is first and foremost produced in accordance with the manner in which all signification is produced. That is, Other is present in a social and cultural context and clarified by that context, like a text by its own context. As we have already seen, the manifestation of the context assures the other – each other – a certain role, a certain kind of presence (E. Lévinas, 1983). However, this is not enough, since «justice is not a legality regulating human masses, from which a technique of social equilibrium is drawn, harmonizing antagonistic forces. [...] Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity. [...] Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of the one for the other»¹⁰. This, since, in fact, «the epiphany of the Other bears its own significance, independent of the signification received from the world», because «the Other not only comes to us from a context but signifies by itself, without that mediation. [...] That presence consists in coming to us, making an entry» (N. Poller, 2006).

Men did not freely choose to live together. «Man's personality is expressed in its fullness exclusively in society with other men, in the relationships woven with them, which are necessary for the fulfillment of the greatest part of needs, which require precisely cooperation with others»¹¹. Our own intelligence «might have less to do with the

⁹ I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Love and Hate*, cit., pp. 95-96.

¹⁰ Id., *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit., p. 159.

¹¹ C. Mortati, *Istituzioni di diritto pubblico*, cit., tome I, p. 4 (my trans.).

physical structure of brains in isolation, than with the complexities of social relationships quite irrespective of form»¹². Closeness to others is not thought out, wanted, chosen; nor is it an occasional situation, linked to the random intersection of paths, routes and choices; nor, finally, does it come from suffering the choices of those who are stronger than us. To return to Lévinas's words: «Proximity does not resolve into the consciousness a being would have of another being that it would judge to be near inasmuch as the other would be under one's eyes or within one's reach, and inasmuch as it would be possible for one to take hold of that being, hold on to it or converse with it, in the reciprocity of handshakes, caresses, struggle, collaboration, commerce, conversation»¹³ – «The face of a neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract»¹⁴. The relationship with Others is before any consciousness, it is the structural, necessary, identifying mode of being of humans. «Our social behavior [...] is dominated by an immensely old heritage of species-specific action and reaction patterns; these are undoubtedly much, much older than the specific capacities of intelligence»¹⁵ – or, to use the philosopher's words again, we can say that «a neighbor concerns me outside of any a priori. But perhaps *before every a priori*, or from an earlier moment than that of the a priori»¹⁶.

In Lévinas's thought the face of Others «resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. [...] the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge»¹⁷. Thus, through the epiphany of the face, Other still offers itself to the Same, but the depth that opens up through this offer makes all comprehension, all possession, impossible, and «modifies the very nature of power, which henceforth can no longer take, but can kill»¹⁸. And if the negation of the other manifested through appropriation or use remained, in a sense, partial, «murder alone lays claim to total negation. [...] To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely»¹⁹. Others, unfortunately, are exposed to the point of my sword or the bullet of my gun and their whole otherness, their whole “being for and in themselves”, vanishes when the sword pierces them or the bullet kills them. However, it is not just so simple and the outcome of this very particular mode of relationship – slayer-slain – is not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, faced with the force of my sword or my gun, Other may oppose to me «not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole, but the very transcendence of his being by relation to that whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence»²⁰.

Then, here is this unwanted and unchosen mechanism again – but one that has always been capable of inhibiting killing.

This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face [...] firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely other [...] the ethical resistance. [...] The impossibility of killing does not have a simply negative and formal signification; the relation with infinity, the idea of infinity in us, conditions it positively. Infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyses my powers and from the depths of defenceless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution.²¹

In this connection, Herodotus²² recounts that Cypselus, son of Eëtion and Labda, future tyrant of Corinth, was supposed to have been killed, still in swaddling clothes, by a group of ten assassins. They demanded the infant son from his mother, who handed him over, thinking that the men wanted to take him to his father Eëtion. Following the plan, the first of them who would have picked up the child, should have killed him by throwing him to the ground, once they had left. But the gods did not want this to happen and made the child smile at the man who first picked him up. The assassin, feeling pity, passed him on to the second accomplice, but this man too, faced with the child's smile, was unable to harm him and passed him on to the third one. And so on to the tenth man, without anyone managing

¹² H. Gee, *The Accidental Species*, cit., p. 137.

¹³ E. Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit., p. 83.

¹⁴ *Ib.*, p. 88.

¹⁵ K. Lorenz, *The Waning of Humaneness*, cit., p. 85.

¹⁶ E. Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit., p. 192, note 20. Italics mine.

¹⁷ *Id.*, *Totality and Infinity*, cit., pp. 197-198.

¹⁸ *Ib.*, p. 198.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ib.*, p. 199.

²¹ *Ib.*, pp. 199-200.

²² See HERODOTUS, *Histories*, V, 92.

to kill little Cypselus, and always because of the smile that lit up his face. This is to say that the signal with which we communicate our readiness for a relationship, or – as in the Cypselus's example – we can block an aggressive behaviour we fear may come from others, is a typical facial expression: the smile. The smile is drawn on the face, it “lights up” the face, that naked, unconditional «presentation of self by self, incommensurable with the presentation of realities simply given, always suspect of some swindle, always possibly dreamt up»²³.

This infinity, stronger than the murderous impulse, and therefore capable of paralysing it, manifests itself in the face – indeed it is the face of Others. «The epiphany of the face brings forth the possibility of gauging the infinity of the temptation to murder, not only as a temptation to total destruction, but also as the purely ethical impossibility of this temptation and attempt»²⁴.

The face, the gaze of Others, in their defenceless nakedness, paralyses my aggressive drive, my temptation to murder. The attunement with the thinking of contemporary ethologists and with the ancient wisdom exemplified in Herodotus's account is too obvious for argumentation.

4. Responsibility for others

Therefore, according to Lévinas, our openness to others does not have its origin in any rational, intentional choice, but rather «responds to an appeal»²⁵. The appearance of the other strikes the subject who, precisely as a consequence of this, reacts through non-indifference, which is neither wanted, nor thought of, nor chosen. It already exists, written in him from before him, and is to be traced back to a primordial time: «in proximity is heard a command come as though from an immemorial past, which was never present, began in no freedom»²⁶.

To describe our reaction when faced with the other, the philosopher speaks of a disruption of the other by the other. So it is the presence of the other that sets our ethical behaviour in motion, because «no one is good voluntarily»²⁷. If anthropologists and ethologists speak of innate mechanisms, phylogenetic formation and hereditary transmission of relational conduct, Lévinas speaks of a diachrony between the attitude of the other and our conduct. With respect to the former, the latter is already given and prior to any possible conscious evaluation or choice. Our non-indifference towards others and our vocation to relationship represent a passive necessity, already given, diachronic with respect to the moment that we go through and that goes through us, in turn. By virtue of it, we feel we must hold a certain conduct towards others. We do not choose the good voluntarily, but we identify with its rays without being aware of this: «The neighbor strikes me before striking me, as though I had heard before he spoke. This anachronism attests to a temporality different from that which scans consciousness»²⁸.

I will schematically highlight some characteristics of innate forms of social behaviour and contextually attempt to compare them with similar features of our ethical responsibility towards Others, as described by the philosopher.

4.1 The innate rules that govern our social life are not learned. They belong to our identity as a species. These rules are not a possible quality of this or that subject. They are an attribute of the species, its congenital way of being. Innate behavioural patterns constitute a kind of a priori presupposition, an original assignment to otherness that comes before any free choice or imposition or teaching by others, since they are engraved within us, in our genome, before any before.

Similarly, in Lévinas's thought, responsibility towards others is not an attribute of the subject, as if the subject existed in itself even before the encounter with others. On the contrary, it is its structural, constitutive mode of being. That is, the subject is assigned to others and to responsibility towards others before any freedom, any acceptance or rejection, any evaluation or reasoning. «The neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused. I am bound to him, him who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signalled, unparalleled; I am bound to him before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized»²⁹.

4.2 The set of innate relationship behaviours is activated by a sensitive perception in a completely automatic way, and in front of the stimulus, we are in a state of absolute passivity. When we are hit by certain signals, our aggressive drive freezes, sublimates or twists in other directions, according to the same stimulus-reaction pattern whereby we close our eyes when faced with a sudden light,

²³ E. Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, cit., p. 202.

²⁴ *Ib.*, p. 199.

²⁵ *Ib.*, p. 99.

²⁶ *Id.*, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit., p. 88.

²⁷ *Ib.*, p. 11.

²⁸ *Ib.*, p. 88.

²⁹ *Ib.*, p. 87.

In parallel, Lévinas believes that the «“pre-original convocation” – which is such, insofar as the consciousness is “original” – is revealed here and now, in the sensitive contact with one's neighbour. In fact, the subject is endowed with a “skin-deep” sensibility, which burns every time it comes into contact with the other» (S. Galanti, 2016). The philosopher also emphasises the absolute passivity of the subject before the provocation of the other's face. The self “is”, not insofar as it poses itself, but insofar as it “de-poses” itself, that is, insofar as it is stripped of its subjectivity. «Not strictly speaking an ego set up in the nominative in its identity, but first constrained to __ It is set up as it were in the accusative form, from the first responsible and not being able to slip away»³⁰. The face of the other is removed from all my claims to “power” and “com-prehension” over him, not because the other is stronger than me or has any authority over me, but because it produces the opening of a new dimension – «and yet this new dimension opens in the sensible appearance of the face»³¹.

4.3 The state of passivity in the face of the activation of the mechanisms for inhibiting aggression is not based on a prior agreement between the parties involved that perhaps provides for some kind of reciprocity. At this level, there is no *pactum societatis* defining the respective rights and duties.

Similarly, according to Lévinas, «the face of a neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract»³²; «I have to respond for an other without attending to an other's responsibility in regard to me» (B. Bergo, 1998). The relationship with others is, in all respects, a «relation without correlation» (B. Bergo, 1998).

4.4 The ethologist states that the innate core of social behaviour of many living species – including humans – has been elaborated through the millennia-long rhythms of natural evolution, through random mutations and adaptive selection. These behaviours are fixed in us before any individual experience and educational process. Phylogenetic evolution is as old as mankind and unwinds silently, according to languages, rhythms, and times placed outside our awareness. In a certain sense, its path and the results it achieves represent an a-priori for us.

At the same time, for the Lithuanian philosopher, being responsible to one's neighbour is an-archic: it «comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory," an "ulterior to every accomplishment," from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence»³³. My passivity does not depend on a present contingency. It stands for a past which is older than any representable origin – for a pre-original past, irrecoverable by memory and history. «This anachronism attests to a temporality different from that which scans consciousness. It takes apart the recuperable time of history and memory in which representation continues. For if, in every experience, the making of a fact precedes the present of experience, the memory, history, or extra-temporality of the a priori recuperates the divergence and creates a correlation between this past and this present»³⁴.

Hearing that some of our conducts – precisely the ones which we consider most noble – are not the result of our reason, but an expression of our instincts, and therefore triggered by the causal stimulus-reaction mechanism, may make us uncomfortable. We want to firmly believe that our actions are always the result of free judgement, and it seems far-fetched – and even somewhat outrageous – to claim that many of the good things we do we do out of instinct and not because we want good. More generally, we are impatient with any causal explanation for our actions. We prefer to consider ourselves noble masters of ourselves, believing – erroneously – that acting in a particular way because of something is incompatible with acting in a particular way in order to achieve a certain result that we freely desire. Actually, analysis on causes and analysis on purposes not only do not exclude each other, but complement each other: «If man did not strive towards goals, his questions as to causes would have no sense; if he has no insight into cause and effect, he is powerless to guide effects towards determined goals, however rightly he may have understood the meaning of these goals. [...] Only on very superficial consideration does free will seem to imply that we can want what we will' in complete lawlessness»³⁵.

So we should have no qualms about admitting that «human behaviour, and particularly human social behaviour, far from being determined by reason and cultural tradition alone, is still subject to all the laws prevailing in all phylogenetically adapted instinctive behaviour»³⁶.

³⁰ E. Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit., p. 85.

³¹ Id., *Totality and Infinity*, cit., p. 198.

³² Id., *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit., p. 88.

³³ Id., *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit., p. 10.

³⁴ Ib., p. 88.

³⁵ K. Lorenz, *On Aggression*, cit., p. 224.

³⁶ Ib., p. 229.

5. Atonement

At this point, one could object that the responsibility to which the face of Others calls in Lévinas's thought is actually something far more radical and decisive than a simple blocking of aggressive behaviour or its diversion towards other deemed neutral targets, e.g. the classic punch on the table. The face of Others immediately disturbs me and forces me to take total responsibility from the first moment. It obsesses me. Such obsessed, I become responsible for everything, and this, not up to a certain mark, within the limits of what is reasonable, but up to the point of feeling obliged to put myself in the place of the other – up to substitution, to extreme sacrifice, to the point of making the subject consider himself a hostage of the other. For Lévinas, the word “I” means to answer for everything and everyone from the very beginning.

However, even considering the philosopher's thought from this perspective, we find no surplus to the role played by human behaviour set according to originally aggressive and phylogenetically adapted forms of conduct. It may sound like a paradox, but the aggressive drive and certain behaviours derived from it are the raw material with which altruism, care and dedication to others are forged. So much so, that it can be said that no matter how primitive or culturally backward a community of humans may be, «natural inclination alone is very nearly sufficient to make men obey the ten commandments»³⁷.

An animal that is caring for its still defenceless and non-self-sufficient young must be able to defend its nest or den with all the energy or – we could also say – with all the meanness of which its species is capable. This is the interest of its species and, ultimately, of the entire balance of life. However, at the same time, and precisely for the same reasons, that animal must be maximally protective and solicitous of its tender offspring. Reconciling these two opposing emotions seems to be an insoluble problem. Actually, it is not an issue at all, because the aggressiveness of the parent manifests itself in all its harshness towards the aggressor, while towards the offspring – which have already been the object of personal recognition since birth, and often even before birth³⁸ – it is transformed into care – we might say, into love. In common parlance, we say: “I would eat you up with kisses”. That is exactly what happens: biting the aggressor and the rival and kissing the child and the partner are applications of the same instinctive behaviour. Through ritualisation and with a few marginal adjustments, evolution has been able to adapt originally aggressive forms of behaviour into actions of appeasement, care, dedication. These ritualised behaviours prevent aggressive manifestations between individuals who “recognise each other”, and also create an “affective” bond between them, so to speak. It may sound strange, but

a personal bond, an individual friendship is found only in animals with highly developed ultra-specific aggression, in fact this bond is the firmer, the more aggressive the particular animal and species is. [...] Doubtless personal bond, love, arose in many cases from intra-specific aggression, by way of ritualization [...] Since these rites are tied up with the person of the partner, and since they later become a need as independent instinct actions. they make the presence of a partner an absolute necessity.³⁹

Therefore, just as Lévinas argues, the perception of the image of another determines consequences far more radical than a simple blocking of aggressive behaviour. The face of Other can force me to take charge of him, can obsess me. Thus obsessed, I become responsible, not to a certain extent, but to the point of substitution, of extreme sacrifice, to the point of feeling myself a true hostage of the other. As I have said, the word “I” means to answer for everything and everyone from the outset.

We should not be surprised, then, if mother nature or a good god decided to write their moral laws into our genetic code rather than entrust them to our reason. In this way, they have protected them from the pride of our intellect and the risks of our infidelity. Not only this: doing so, they have also fixed our exact dimension in this world. We are here not to enslave it, but to co-exist with all that is other with respect to ourselves, because «the subjectivity of a subject come late into a world which has not issued from his projects does not consist in projecting, or in treating this world as one's project»⁴⁰. It consists rather in experiencing relationships with all that is other than oneself. And it is by means of the genetic code that living beings are related to each other and communicate with each other; it is this code that modulates our organism and thus also our own will. However, we must also believe – or rather, by reason of what has just been said, convince ourselves even more – that this passivity of the subject, when faced with the

³⁷ *Ib.*, p. 243.

³⁸ In this sense, it has been experimentally proven that some animals that, for natural reasons or due to manipulations linked to experimentation, were unable to recognise their offspring, not only did not care for them, but attacked them to the point of killing them. See *Ib.*, p. 113.

³⁹ *Ib.*, pp. 209-210.

⁴⁰ E. Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit., p. 122.

activation of certain modes of his behaviour, «does not constitute the negative mark of a retardation of being – the mark that distinguishes an essentially passive subject, limited and oppressed by forces external to his freedom. It is, on the contrary, the very sign of exteriority, of separation, of the multiplicity of others»⁴¹. And these externalities, separateness, multiplicity of others «guarantee precisely the excess of the infinite or, to express it concretely, of all the protrusion with respect to being – of all the Good – that is produced in social relations»⁴².

Not everyone likes to admit that we are good by instinct and selfish by reason – that is, to admit that these instincts that are articulated on the stimulus-reaction concatenation also apply to man, the *homo sapiens* master of the world. Some see in this conclusion an offence to human dignity. «All too willingly man sees himself as the centre of the universe, as something not belonging to the rest of nature but standing apart as a different and higher being»⁴³. Nevertheless, after what has been said, I think it is fair to assume that it is precisely these pre-original and congenital openings that underpin the authority of all other human rules. If we want to use the language of philosophers, we can hypothesise that it is these forms that constitute the so-called natural law, the foundation of validity and unit of measurement of the other ethical, legal and customary rules – that is to say, those laws that a good god has transmitted to us and that he has decided to engrave with his own hands in the stone tablets of our genome, the safest casket against any risk of theft, manipulation, distortion.

This conclusion – let it be clear – makes no claim to be new. Justinian's *Digest* already recalled a passage from Ulpianus, taken from the *Institutiones*, in which it is written:

*Ius naturale est, quod natura omnia animalia docuit: nam ius istud non humani generis proprium, sed omnium animalium, quae in terra, quae in mari nascuntur, avium quoque commune est. Hinc descendit maris atque feminae coniunctio, quam quam nos matrimonium appellamus, hinc liberorum procreatio, hinc educatio: videmus etenim cetera quoque animalia, feras etiam istius iuris peritia censerit.*⁴⁴

Now, on the one hand, it is true that Ulpianus only referred to the aspects of individual and social life most directly related to procreation and parental care; however, on the other hand, this was solely due to the fact that, at the time, little more was known about animal behaviour and comparative ethology.

The quoted passage has often been interpreted reductively and, on the basis of such an interpretation, severely criticised. It has been argued that the Tyrian jurist grossly misrepresented the concept of natural law, so that it became especially in the Middle Ages, a source of misunderstanding and confusion [...] Here the Stoic idea of natural law immanent to the whole universe, which is manifestly present in Ulpianus, is understood by him materialistically and deterministically, as a natural, biological necessity. We have already observed that, in Stoic pantheism, which identifies divinity, reason and nature, the concept of ethical law is confused with that of physical law: Ulpian sticks to the latter and calls instinct, which is common to all animals, *ius naturale*; and loses sight of the essential aspect of *ius*, being a norm, a proposition that states what must be done, not what happens by physical necessity, independently of the human will.⁴⁵

In fact, Ulpian's thought seems to me to be extraordinarily modern, almost prophetic with respect to the discoveries about man and other animals – *omnia animalia* – that marked the progress of science in the centuries after him. And it is interesting to note that what the interpreter grasps in the passage in question, considering it the most censurable aspect, constitutes instead its extraordinary topicality – I refer to the tracing back of natural law to the system of instincts or innate models of behaviour.

6. Conclusion

One of the aims of this short paper was to highlight how Lévinas's philosophical reflection and contemporary comparative ethology research, despite following completely different paths, have arrived at some concordant conclusions. In other words: two independent lines of research, which have never explicitly and consciously intersected, have arrived at a definition of certain characteristics of human behaviour and a diagnosis of certain related problems that coincide perfectly.

Recalling an ancient proverb, Lorenz claims that «four eyes see better than two, and this is all the more true if a

⁴¹ S. Petrosino, *Introduction to E. Lévinas, Altrimenti che essere o al di là dell'essenza*, cit. p. XVII (my trans.).

⁴² *Ib.*, p. XVIII (my trans.).

⁴³ K. Lorenz, *On Aggression*, cit., p. 213.

⁴⁴ JUSTINIAN, *Digest*, 1, 1, 1, 3 (ULPIANUS, 1 *Inst.*).

⁴⁵ G. Fassò, *Storia della filosofia del diritto*, vol. I, cit., p. 117-118 (my trans.).

fellow scientist, starting from different induction bases, arrives at identical results, since this implies unequivocal corroboration» (K. Lorenz, 1974). The two different and converging perspectives Lorenz refers to are, in our case, those of contemporary comparative ethology and the thought of the great Lithuanian philosopher.

If we want to abandon the common sense approach referred to by Lorenz and try to explain in more accurate terms why certain encounters are not at all random – and are actually more important than what might appear at first glance –, we must remember that when we have two distant points of view to define the content of a thought or a problem, a sort of triangulation takes place, like the one traced by a navigator on a nautical chart. This triangulation allows us to determine “where we are” with great reliability, if not with exactness. «Communication, and the knowledge of other minds that it presupposes, is the basis of our concept of objectivity, our recognition of a distinction between false and true belief. There is no going outside this standard to check whether we have things right» (D. Davidson, 2001). Therefore, by combining the two lines of thought that I have briefly outlined, which are independent of each other, but developed in a shared cultural environment, we establish a fundamental condition for assessing the reliability of the results of the research conducted. «We can, of course, turn to a third party and a fourth to broaden and secure the interpersonal standard of the real, but this leads not to something intrinsically different, just to more of the same» (D. Davidson, 2018). Here, recalling Herodotus’s and Ulpian’s words is even superfluous.

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