FILOZOFIA WOBEC ZŁA
Od spekulacji do transgresji
PHILOSOPHY AND EVIL
From Speculation to Transgression

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PROJEKT OKŁADKI

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Publikacja dofinansowana przez Uniwersytet Jagielloński ze środków Instytutu Filozofii

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Wydanie I, Kraków 2018

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# SPIS TREŚCI

Słowo wstępne ................................................................. 7
Marek Drwięga, Zło – ten problem filozofii .......................... 9
James Mensch, Economy and Theodicy .................................. 25
Karol Tamowski, Zło .......................................................... 39
Wojciech Zalewski, Zło a nieustępliwość nadziei ..................... 51
Tadeusz Gadacz, Czy myślenie chroni nas przed złem? .......... 67
Łukasz Kołoczek, Tischner: czy zło jest demoniczne? .......... 79
Jacek Flicek, Filozofia wobec zła ........................................... 101
Carla Canullo, Subjectivity and evil. About the Essai sur le mal by Jean Naber .................................................. 107
Milosz Puczyłowski, Zło, nicość i Bóg. Filozoficzna lektura Kirchliche Dogmatik Karla Bartha .................................................. 133
Radosław Strzelecki, Satanizm samotniczej jaźni a czas – perspektywa dialogiczna ......................................................... 149
Łukasz Kamiński, Zło jako rzeczy w porządku rzeczywistości .... 159
Anna Czepiel, Bezświadomość w myśli Martina Heidegger i Hanny Arendt: dobra czy zła? .................................................. 177
Piotr Domeracki, Nieuchronność nihilistycznej zdolności niszczenia. W kręgu etyki przemocy. Aktualia ........................................... 209
Bibliografia wybrana ........................................................ 229
Noty o autorach ................................................................ 235
Indeks osobowy .................................................................... 239
Indeks rzeczowy ................................................................. 243
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SUBJECTIVITY AND EVIL.
ABOUT THE ESSAI SUR LE MAL
BY JEAN NABERT

1. Jean Nabert: a subterranean presence in the French Philosophy

Among the French philosophers of this century, Jean Nabert is not the one that has benefited or that is benefiting today of the most striking fortune. The work by this philosopher would seem to be marked by the same character both discreet and rigorous through which his contemporaries and friends have remembered him and have described his person. Nevertheless, the three works published when he was alive that is L'expérience intérieure de la liberté (1924), Éléments pour une éthique (1943), L'Essai sur le mal (1955), the collection of unpublished texts that appeared after his death under the title Le désir de Dieu (1966) and a great number of essays and articles today collected in a single work, have

3 For the quotations of the works by Nabert we will refer to the following editions that will be quoted with the acronyms as it follows: Expérience intérieure de la liberté (= EL), Puf, Paris 1994; Éléments pour une éthique (= EE), Aubier, Paris 1992; Essai sur le mal (= EM), Cerf, Paris 1997; Le désir de Dieu (= DD), Cerf, Paris 1996. The contributions and the articles by Nabert published in different periodicals have been collected and published with the preface by Paul Ricoeur in Expérience intérieure de la liberté, pp. 243–426.
never stopped to be present more or less explicitly in the French philosophy. In fact, Nabert is one of the masters that we meet along the path made by Paul Ricoeur and currently he is at the centre of studies that aim at examining the influence of his thought in the philosophy by Lévinas and by Ricoeur himself. And if it’s true that the fame of Nabert both in this nation and abroad never reached the one that Jean-Paul Sartre had, of Maurice Merleau-Ponty or of other French philosophers of the 20th century, on the other hand, it is also true that he has never been totally outside the philosophic scenery.

Getting to the context of this presentation focused on the topic of evil, we will state first of all that in what we can define without any doubt as his most dramatic work, the *Essai sur le mal*, Nabert not only expresses “his” thesis on evil, but through such a presentation, he also wants to re-think subjectivity, making it by starting from the experiences, which represent or are aimed at its destruction. Most of all, he aims at re-thinking that subjectivity capable of the most atrocious evil, the one of man against another man, as he had witnessed experiencing both World Wars.

This hypothesis on subjectivity and on finitude where Nabert roots the most original evil, represents still nowadays – in a time torn by wars – the passionate challenge of a philosophy that has human beings and their wounds close at its heart.

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2. The ethical path of evil

Paul Ricoeur, in the avant-propos of L'homme faible, published five years after the Essai sur le mal, sketching the outlines of the field where his Symbolique du mal starts, states that it in order to design the meaning of what is at stake under the philosophical point of view, to which his book compares, he could have chosen the subtitle Grandeur et limite d'une vision éthique du monde, a subtitle not free from references to Hegel and motivated by the form undertaken here by the "re-thinking the symbolique du mal through the philosophical reflection".4 In this context, of l'incrévable culpabilité we are only interested in the definition of ethical vision of the world, or, more precisely, the definition of the problem of evil to which such a vision leads, a problem that, as the philosopher reminds, is the moment when it is put to test as far as its validity is concerned.5 This ethical vision aims at "understanding evil and the freedom in a relationship that is more and more reciprocal between them," and "trying to comprehend evil through freedom means deciding of entering in evil going through the narrowest door".6 It is starting from the criticism by Kant and, in particular, of his Essay on radical evil that such a vision got the terms that Ricoeur inherits and to which he compares. Going back over the historical stages to go up again to times and works closer to him, Ricoeur quotes Jean Nabert, who, being in this speculative line, linked freedom that takes evil on with the comprehension that it acquires about itself when it reflexively gets back to the evil it committed. At the end of these pages we will get back to the problem of the ethical vision of evil and the perspective it opens, as well as to the "dialogue" between the two French philosophers. Here we are interested in the point where the graft of Nabert in the ethical tradition mentioned above took place and that links together the "mutual comprehension" of freedom and evil, freedom that we will see as being free causality of consciousness. In particular, we are interested in the idea that Nabert proposes on the comprehension of oneself, a crucial topic of the thought by the French philosopher around which his speculation rotated since the beginning.

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5 We remind that, for Ricoeur, the problem of evil is the pierre de touche of the ethical vision of the world. The pierre de touche is the toucheau, the tester used to check the purity of precious metals.
In 1934, ten years after the publication of his first work, Nabert wrote the drafts of an essay – doomed to be an ébauche – under the title *La conscience peut-elle se comprendre?* In those pages there is the attempt to focus on the moment when the consciousness starts to *se questionner* in order to comprehend itself. An idea, this one that represents the thread also in other works by Nabert. At the beginning of *Éléments pour une éthique* we read in fact that there are two alternatives that a self that wants to reflect on history has: either the self knows his actions detaching from them and reading the text written by them and as an "objective" interpreter, or the self tries to *se comprendre* through this text. In the *Essai sur le mal* the problem of comprehension of the self is linked to the justification of the evil committed, justification the consciousness can attempt to get closer only appealing to a principle that "springs from his own action, and right when it works to highlight itself and to comprehend itself (*se comprendre*)." Finally, in the renowned beginning of *Le désir de Dieu*, we read that "le désir de Dieu se confond avec le désir d'une compréhension de soi". But what is that "soi, self" that the consciousness can comprehend for which it can undertake and face the challenge of evil? And also, which "ego" which subject are defined by this challenge?

The distinction of the terms between *se comprendre* (comprehend oneself) and *se connaître* (knowing oneself), in addition to inviting us to distinguish between the two different behaviors that the consciousness gets towards itself as an "object", also singles out the existing link between comprehension and consciousness. While the *se connaître* is purely theoretical act, poor, where the consciousness questions itself from outside, "comme une suite des événements", comprehending is an act, a question where the being of consciousness is already at stake and questions itself from within. The question and the answer or better that act of consciousness that is act, the *question-answer*, are inside the conditions of this movement of comprehension, a movement whose method or better whose path is *reflection* (réflexion).
In the contribution *La philosophie réflexive*, written for the *Encyclopédie française*, Nabert sketches the historical lines of the topic of reflection trying to specify which is the statute of the *philosophie réflexive*. Such a clarification is necessary as the connotation of “réflexive” would seem to be entitled to philosophy *toto genere*. The boundary between philosophical reflection and reflexive philosophy lies in the different meaning and path that the way of reflection follows. The reflexive method can be either a method of regressive analysis that retraces the tracks of an absolute that reflects itself in the movement of a particular conditions or it can be meant as a path through which the subject constitutes itself and thanks to which this latter grasps the laws and the regulations of the spiritual activity that is immanent in all the dominions. This latter alternative is the one that in the history of philosophy enabled the singling out an autonomous *philosophie réflexive*.¹³

Starting from the ébauche dated in '34, Nabert just deals with the strict binding of reflection and of the *se comprendre*, a problem that springs and is put in connection with the one of the meaning of the "self" or the reflexive "oneself" in comprend-oneself. The "self" comprehended by consciousness does not pre-exist it, nor it is extrinsic to it. It is neither a *comprehension of oneself* led by a subject, an Ego (*moi*), a *je pense transcendantal* or by the Ego (*moi*) of personalism. It is a particular act that becomes concrete in the question on the nature of the *self*, a question that is the real stake of this *philosophie réflexive*. In the consciousness questioning, the movement of reflection is not condemned neither to an abstract circularity nor to a simple going back over the progress made; on the contrary, it is just along this path or progress that the truth of consciousness comes to light. This truth is expressed by the *self* that, is mutually verified only in the reflexive comprehension. The immediate and pre-reflexive consciousness announces such a movement of reflection and, "quoique libre, la réflexion ne pourrait surgir si la conscience humaine ne se prêtait pas à cet événement";¹⁴ this way, one of the most important consequences of reflexive analysis is the one of having favoured and justified "une compréhension de la conscience immédiate qui ne fait plus de celle-ci un

¹³ See El. 398–399. Through reflection we are at a level that is the one of the discourse "on" the subject, a discourse where the different philosophies of reflection have differentiated giving life to two trends, the German one led by Kant, and the French one whose referent is the philosophy of the *effort* by Maine de Biran.

¹⁴ El. 400.
déroulement ou une suites d'états, mais surprend jusque dans ses formes les plus humbles une certaine relation active de la conscience avec soi.”

There is, on the other hand, a natural reflection from which it is necessary to distinguish the philosophical reflection, a distinction that it is necessary to remember at least to grasp the fact that, even though we are in a perspective that concerns every consciousness and every subject, not everyone overcomes the threshold of natural reflection to get to the philosophical one. The problem, in reality, only marginally concerns the perspective by Nabert that cares for the research of the reason why consciousness is awakened by the questionnement more than for the explanation of a boundary between the two types of reflections. This way he tries to reveal, according to an appealing image by Ricoeur, the structures of the “place” where reflection was born, the structures of spontaneous consciousness.”

3. The “philosophie réflexive”

The passage from natural reflection to the philosophic one lies in the question that Nabert highlighted as the moment of the beginning of the comprehension of the self: “Qui suis-je, moi qui suis ceci?”, that is, “Qui je suis-je, moi qui suis dans cette déterminité.” The question through which the reflective moment of the comprehension of the self starts, is the interrogative of consciousness on truth of its determined being, an interrogative that, from “natural” wonder for its determination becomes philosophical apprehension, research. Nabert will answer to this question in the *Essai sur le mal* stating that “nous ne sommes pas (réellement ou effectivement) ce que nous sommes (absolument),” that is, putting at stake an absolute that enters its determination. Either the content of the “se” of the *se comprendre* and the value of the perspective opened by the movement of the reflection, lies in the benefit of this absolute grasped from and in conscience.

The question on one’s being is the moment when consciousness was born thanks to the act of its questioning, which is an exhaustion work. It is not a simple “ask-oneself” but rather a “dig-oneself” that articulates on questions

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15 EL 400.
16 See, for this reason, EE 5-6.
17 DD 415.
that spring from the determination of the finished existence: "D'où je viens? Combien je suis? Qui je suis? De quoi je dépend?" This travail will no longer be expressly thematised by Nabert, but it will be both implicit and implicated, as we will see, in the path of the speculation by this philosopher. The determination of existence thematised in the ébauche dated in '34 will be conveyed in the pre-philosophic situations from which the Éléments pour une éthique start from, that is to say the feeling of guilt, of the failure and of loneliness; it will be conveyed in the feeling of the unjustifiable that it at the beginning of the Essai sur le mal and in the reflection on finitude that are the first part of Le désir de Dieu. These are the data, the experiences from which reflection start to get to grasp the structures of the subject.

4. The unjustifiable evil

The Essai sur le mal starts with the accusation of the inadequateness of moral norms or of value judgements when involved to justify tragic events such as a premature death, evils inflicted to humanity by wars fought in the name of an ideal of justice or of race or more a serious injustice of which we are or we have been victims. The consciousness that suffers the evils never stops, of debouncing their radical unjustifiableness, even after having taken them on under a must-be.

It is not possible to lead back this feeling of the unjustifiable to a "réaction d'une sensibilité blessée"; its peremptoriness demands its comprehension. This is an attempt that is not new for philosophy according to which evil has always represented a challenge to which it has answered with different attempts that in the Essai sur le mal are stigmatised in the conception of evil as a privatio boni or as an antithetical moment that will be overcome by a dialectic moment (Hegel). On the other hand, the feeling of the unjustifiable certifies that evil is an irreducible data, it is a positive negativity as irremediably felt as such. Facing it, the moral laws, the reference to a must-be, fail as if they were an incurable wound.

But mutually the irreducibility of the feeling endlessly moves consciousness in the research of what legitimises this judgement of its. The question that arises

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38 DD 421.
39 EM 21.
from the experience becomes a need of a thought, of a philosophy that is not "in front of evil" but that is fed by the lived experience. Then here is the question: "Qui autorise la conscience à déclarer que ces maux sont injustifiables, si cette idée implique, en effet, quelque jugement de droit, et non point simplement la constatation de ce qu'il peut y avoir en eux d'intolérable pour l'individu?" But we can go from the accusation of inadequateness of the regulation, when called for the comprehension of evil, to the research of reality for which evil is for us what it really is, only going back in the wearying path of the travail d'exaspération. The unjustifiable in fact is not "against" the regulation but it makes us go to the root of what the regulation represents for the consciousness that denounced evil. That is to say it invites us not to be happy with the good made nor even to "settle for" the "justification" if the evil suffered. We can face this invitation only if we go from a perspective where the comparison with the duty is "outside" the consciousness, to a perspective where the axis is moved inside the consciousness, and this happens if we wonder why it can never be satisfied even when we have acted correctly. Moral legality does not use up the comprehension of the wounded consciousness neither it saves the bad consciousness. They both cannot comprehend the wicked act made or suffered and declared as "unjustifiable" they need an "acte intérieur à cette affirmation, enveloppant sa propre garantie, et faisant surgir dans le même temps une opposition absolue entre la spiritualité pure dont il témoigne et la structure du monde."\(^{21}\)

The exhaustion work reveals here in its heuristic value. Going from the impact with evil to the question about the act that legitimises this shock, the accusation of evil becomes a possibility given to the subject to discover at deeper reality that reveals that its feeling of what is unjustifiable would not be lessened nor exhausted by morality. Failing every resource of the moral law, the consciousness will have to look for what makes true its act of reaction against the evil starting from what, in the same act of its reaction, it does not allow any acquiescence. This research is the exhaustion work, a work that does not progressively exhaust the edges of extrinsic immediateness to the subject leading it to grasp the essentiality of what is at the centre of the act that denounced evil, that is to say of a "forme absolue à quoi rien n'est ajouté comme rien n'est retiré si l'on dit qu'elle est forme de l'absolu spirituel".\(^{22}\) Form of the absolute for

\(^{20}\) See EM 49.  
\(^{21}\) EM 51.  
\(^{22}\) EM 52.
which the problem of evil even before having to do with the order of morality concerns the subject.

5. The shuttered subject

"Dire que nous ne sommes pas (réellement ou effectivement) ce que nous sommes (absolument), c'est rassembler la signification d'une expérience émotionnelle à laquelle nul homme ne peut se flatter d'échapper, si pleine et si riche qui soit, par ailleurs, sa destinée." From the ébauche dated in '34 to the Le désir de Dieu, the affirmation of the existence in the consciousness of a form of absolute, of a "I am" that goes beyond any determination and any statement based on the relationship finite-infinite and that expresses and develops the sense of an existence that "is", this affirmation is the bearing point of the philosophy by Nabert. Close to Kant and Maine de Biran, from '34 onwards we find the presence that is more and more relevant of the thought by Fichte, an author he knew well thanks to one of his masters, Léon Brunschvicg. The debt towards Fichte is also witnessed from expressions which would seem borrowed by the German philosopher, as a thetic statement, original statement, the same matter of comprehend itself of the consciousness.

Returning to the topic from which we started, which was introduced for the first time in the second part of the Éléments pour une éthique but already present in the ébauche dated in '34, we see that, with this, the themes of the 1943 work are moved from an ethical axis to the metaphysical axis which originates the experience of the subject. In fact, it should be remembered that the first part of Éléments pour une éthique is devoted to the reflection on the experiences of fault, failure and loneliness and on the feelings that derive from these experiences. Any reflection starts from these experiences. And it is thanks to this that the shift from the ethical plan to the metaphysical plan dealt with in the fourth chapter of the work titled La conscience pure takes place.

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23 EM 56.
24 About the link between Fichte and Nabert the thèse by S. Robillard, Liberté et transcendance: Nabert après Fichte, is absolutely enlightening. In this text some topics by Fichte and Nabert are dealt with by proposing an analytic path through the works of the two authors. We remind that already Jean Lacroix defined Nabert as the "French Fichte" (J. Lacroix, Panorama della filosofia francese contemporanea, Rome 1971, p. 19).
Starting from its elements, reflection, comprehending them, leads to a “fundamental ambition” common to the three negative experiences mentioned above. The common negative trait that runs through them plays an important role in guiding this comprehension, since it is comparable to the effort that the concept accomplishes by passing from ignorance and error to reach science. To the question of why fault, failure, loneliness, and, we would add, evil, are “really” such, Nabert responds by setting out the only “rule” that philosophical reflection should follow; i.e., that of not extending the meaning of a principle beyond the experiences that have allowed its discovery. In this direction we can read the meaning of the *foyers de la réflexion*, living centres of reflection that is, as we have seen, “l’effort de la conscience de se comprendre soi-même.” In *Eléments pour une éthique* three *foyers* are presented: the *foyer éthique*, the *foyer théorique*, the *foyer esthétique*, according to the three main functions of consciousness, each of which responds to a particular order of knowledge and each of which corresponds to a subject generated by reflection and not pre-existing to it. As fault, failure and loneliness are ethical experiences, the *foyer* where reflection on these elements, will be an ethical *foyer*. And the stakes put into play by this *foyer* are not about the desire for beauty nor the search for a theoretical judgment but it is the comprehension of oneself, *enjeu* that we comprehend reflexively because all three of these elements, are the “négation d’une même ambition fondamentale, d’un même désir, qui ne concerne pas l’assimilation d’un objet par un sujet mais la génération d’un monde de rapports qui rendraient les consciences transparentes les unes aux autres et chacune à soi même.” The comprehension of the self consists in this desire for transparency. Now, the subject that reflects, as we said, does not exist before reflection but is born with it. The birth of a subject takes place around the question which the consciousness asks itself, questioning its own being asking: “qui suis-je?” this question that links the desire for transparency of

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26 See EE 53.
27 In the above-mentioned work, Robilliard devotes a wide section to this topic analysing all the structure of the fourth chapter he defined as *clé de voûte* of the fourth.
28 “Et s’il est vrai que la réflexion est toujours un effort de la conscience pour se comprendre, il suit qu’à chacun de ces *foyers* correspondent un sujet qui ne préexiste point tant à la réflexion qu’il ne se définit et ne se constitue par elle” (EE 63).
29 EE 62.
30 EE 63. We will never insist too much on the importance of this question that Nabert recalls since 1934 as the question where the reflexive comprehension starts.
the consciousness to the comprehension of oneself. We can clearly see the similarity to the ébouche of '34. With the difference, or rather, with the clarification that what in '34 was represented by determination, in the work of '43 becomes a question that arises in the comprehension of the elements of reflection.

The subject is born from comprehension because in the negative, or rather, thanks to the negative that seemed to have said the last word on the ego condemning it for its guilt or imprisoning it in its loneliness, the being of the ego grasps an absolute certainty of existing, which is an original and absolute statement, prime metaphysical order, a statement that the being of the ego generates and regenerates. 31 There is a reciprocity between this statement and the act of affirming it, an act that is valid only if it is the affirmation absolue (absolute affirmation) to affirm itself in me, through me, and only if it is that "garantit mon affirmation et la soutient". 32 Now, the desire of being, against which evil screams and experiences cry out that destroy the subject is the meaning of the "se" of se comprendre. To the question "can consciousness comprehend itself?" we can respond in the affirmative provided that this comprehension is not guided by an I am outside of the subject, but that the I am that guides it is established in the subject without coming from the subject; or again, without being any of the factors of a relationship between two terms, nor a part of a whole. 33 The affirmation originaire (primary affirmation) establishes the path of reflection that this opens up and from which, at the same time, constitutes the gain. The consciousness can comprehend itself because the element from reflection, the feelings which nourish the reflection, reveal what is affirmed in the consciousness, even without identifying only with "this" finite consciousness. The revealing of the affirmation absolue in terms of I am is an act and not a judgment; it is a confession, a promise of a caution attached to every judgment. It is not known following a progressive expropriation that declares first what it is not, but it is grasped through the exhaustion work thanks to which we gain, gradually, the principle that guides reflection. So, we come to the affirmation originaire via a path that is exactly the opposite of a comparison or a progressive negation. The exhaustive work is carried out by the principle of self-comprehension which, at the same time, is perceived as the positive heart

31 "L'être du moi ne peut naître que de la compréhension qu'il acquiert de soi par une affirmation qui l'engendre et le régénère" (EE 67).
32 EE 67.
33 See DD 423.
of subjectivity. The consciousness can comprehend itself because the sense of "se" (of se comprendre) lies in the absoluteness that, as the absolute affirmation of being, is affirmed and known only in the consciousness itself.

Now, only the discovery of this *affirmation absolue* as an act of the subject's consciousness gives the problem of the unjustifiability of evil its full meaning. The certainty of existence asserted against its violent interruption, as well as the scandal of the evil which harms and stuns, are attested in their truth by an "I am" intrinsic to the affirmation of the unjustifiability of evil, of every breakdown of existence. The "I am" that I pronounce is in relationship as with the finite ego (moi) as with the absolute affirmation that asserts itself in me. This absolute affirmation can be verified only in the story of the ego of which it is a source, Ego thanks to which "la rencontre mouvante de la conscience pure de soi et du monde" happens. Thereby, for the Ego, "to be" reciprocally means to act on this bond that "le fait subjectivité".

This is the beginning of the singular process that marks the story of subjectivity; a process by which the confirmation of the *affirmation originaire* can always and only happen in the story of a subjectivity which, precisely because of this relationship, arises as characterised by an invincible gap: a gap evidenced by its inability to be completely equal to itself and created by the transition from pure consciousness to real consciousness. Subjectivity is the act of becoming consciousness of oneself; and in order for this to come about, it is necessary that a resistance appears as if gathered from nowhere. The subject is born, therefore, by reflection; in other words, born in a movement that is already always a difference that comes back to itself. This difference, remaining in the subject, also invites us not to think about the birth of subjectivity in terms of the dualism between the state of purity (the *affirmation originaire* as pure consciousness) and the state of fall (real consciousness). Thereby the *affirmation originaire* is absolute, in the sense that it is totally devoid of any connection that could make it a substance, but it is grasped only in the relationship that it has with the ego.

But if, on the one hand, there is no self-consciousness that is not also consciousness of the *affirmation absolue*, on the other, precisely because of the assertion of this certainty, the concrete self captures its own invincible finitude, since "l'impossibilité de s'égaliser à soi entre dans la constitution de la"
subjectivité. It enters there because the confirmation occurs in the subjectivity and gives the certainty of the presence of the pure consciousness. It is relevant because the empirical and "real" consciousness, in history, can comprehend itself only as it is inhabited by the pure consciousness. And although it is excluded that the empirical consciousness can be equalled to pure consciousness in the world in which it is called to manifest itself, it is still true that between the two conciousnesses there is a numerical unity without which the finite subject could not tell its story. Therefore, our being is always inequality to itself. Nabert calls this "metaphysics order," "real order" witnessed and confirmed by the life of the ego; this inequality is the crisis with which subjectivity arises.

6. The crisis of the Ego, that is: where evil takes root

Evil is grafted into this particular historical crasis. From the impurity of causality to the tragedy of sin, and from here to the tragedy of the secession of consciousnesses, a unique and progressive path takes place which, by making explicit the nature of evil and making it possible to grasp it in its irreducible essence, makes known the truth of subjectivity in which evil is rooted. Linking evil and subjectivity in so close a reciprocity may be equivalent to vetoing all the conceptions with which we try to reduce, or at least, to diminish reality of it. The first level of this analysis on evil, nearly a sort of "premise" that gives it back its meaning, is the analysis of the causality of consciousness.

Already in *Expérience intérieure de la liberté*, the consciousness is defined as free because, thanks to the causality that connotes it, it is the complete cause of an act. In the thèse, the definition of the causality of the consciousness

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36 EE 72.

37 By defining this series of passages *itinéraire de la conscience*, Paul Naulin focuses in them the sense of the philosophy by Nabert, underlying how in Nabert there is a very thin but essential link between historical consciousness and the progress of the relationship of the consciousness at is principle (see P. Naulin, *L'itinéraire de la conscience*, p. 31). By further clarifying such a relationship, the author notices that the making explicit of intelligible consciousness by the historical consciousness is possible insofar as the former makes itself present to the second "in the contingent succession of events" (ibidem), events whose meaning is clarified in the notes of a course held by Nabert at the École Nationale Supérieure, and quoted by Naulin, where we read that they are "the stages through which consciousness needs to pass to reach possession of the self, the universal structures that condition the appearance of subjectivity" (Ibidem).
emerges from the dialogue with philosophers such as Kant, Maine de Biran and Bergson. The supporting thesis of *Experence intérieure de la liberté* is the demonstration of the existing relationship, within a decision, between motivation and act; a demonstration which follows the refutation of all those theories that affirm, instead, the otherness between the two moments. At the basis of a decision or a deliberation there are some motives caused by consciousness. More precisely, they are unaccomplished acts of consciousness, such because they remain in the state of possibilities not chosen. The motivation that precedes the act is not extraneous, therefore, to the consciousness, nor to the final decision that takes the form of an act. On the contrary, it is the continuation and the consequence of the causality of the consciousness whose activity is as full in each motive as in the final deliberation.38

Reflective movement, taking us back to the nature of motivation, also allows us to go back up to the threshold of the origin of deliberation, i.e. consciousness, defined in the thèse as an unaccomplished an inachevé act. This inachèvement prevents it from grasping itself in a limpid and transparent way and forces it to articulate itself through the "vehicle" of psychological life, where the continuation of the thoughts and alternatives not chosen but carried out in any case, takes place. Consciousness is an act to which "il faut restituer toute son importance pour fixer le moment où l'expérience intérieure de la liberté peut commencer".39 Asserting that there is a causality of consciousness, and that this happens because consciousness is an act, Nabert responds positively to the question that is the enjeu of the thèse and of the meditations prior to 1934, that is, if there exists an inner experience of freedom.40

In *Essai sur le mal* the causality of consciousness is again expressly thematised. In a paragraph in which the proximity between this work and the *Experence intérieure de la liberté* is impressive, we read that "au travers des motifs accessibles au souvenir, et par leur analyse, nous essayons de progresser vers le cœur de la causalité. Mais la conceptualisation des motifs nous masque la qualité de l'intention qui les a inspirés."41 The concealment of the intention is attested by the feeling of insecurity that we often experience, in spite

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39 EL 31.
40 This question was also the occasion from which the study *L'expérience intérieure chez Kant* was born (today in EL 243–311).
41 EM 69.
of our positive response to moral law, a feeling that should warn us about any easy victory of "good" over "bad" intentions: the evil that we have not carried out was not won by the good intention that anyhow inspired our action. This causality of consciousness, in *Essai sur le mal* is defined as impure and we read that impurity is in the irreparable interval that is between the possible and the ego that chooses it; irreparable because it tells the story of an act that by its very nature will always remain inachevé, unaccomplished, and that it will only be able to comprehend itself reflexively.

However, un-accomplishment does not mean impurity but merely indicates that the life of consciousness comprehend itself only indirectly and through the motives. Furthermore, starting from ébauche dated in '34, we no longer limit to know the incompleteness of consciousness thanks to the work of exhaustion which digs its life almost as if it were a crucible, we arrive at the original gap between the self and the empirical consciousness, the difference that constitutes the radical gap between the work of '24 and subsequent writings. Once the gap between the pure consciousness and the empirical consciousness, between the pure ego and the finite ego, is placed, Nabert also distinguishes two kinds of causality, one pure and one impure, defined as such to indicate that the latter "is radically other" from the first and that the transition from the first to the second would even imply the problem of a radical regeneration of the being of the ego. The difference between the two causalities lies in the fact that while in the first the unchosen motives are dissolved as the false hypotheses of a surveyor dissolve in the reasons and for the reasons by which they are known, in the second all the possible motives are kept alive. But would a pure causality still be the causality of an ego? The negative answer clarifies the meaning of the adjective impure: impurity is the index of the birth of the ego because keeping the possible alive and the gap that exists between the latter and the ego that adheres to it, is the gap with which subjectivity springs. The inevitable adhesion of the ego to a possible motive generated by the only causality that may be its own, is a preference of the ego to itself, it is *amor sui*, they are penchants, an instinct with which the causality of the consciousness gets confused. In this way, the impurity of causality, that is impurity of motives, opens the way to the rooting of evil in the finite subjectivity.
7. Evil as sin and secession

However, the complicity of a will that chooses to operate it is necessary for there to be evil properly so-called. Evil is articulated in the two forms of the sin, as the evil done by the subject in regard to himself, and of the evil of secession; that is, the evil done to another man. Both forms are characterised by a radicality which, first of all, questions the being of the ego.

Sin is the breaking of the ego with itself, it is a diminishing of the being of the ego. The evil of secession is the breaking of the original bond that unites the consciousnesses between them. Again, sin is a rupture, within the ego, of the tension with which the subjectivity springs, i.e. the link between the pure consciousness and the empirical consciousness. Again, sin expresses the renunciation of the ego to be equal to its true being, to itself and it disregards the link with the absolute statement. This renunciation, which in sin hides that violence which, although connoting it, will become a clear tragedy only in the evil of secession, is an "blessure que le moi s'est faite à lui-même". Wound which, in turn, has a dual outcome in the life of subjectivity. First, it calls into question the "totalité de l'être que nous sommes"; the heart of subjective crisis; secondly, and herein lies its heuristic power, it manifests that causality that only our actions can reveal, and which witnesses to a radical refusal to make the interests of morality and good prevail over those of the finite Ego.

If the feeling of the unjustifiable revealed the structure of subjectivity, the feeling of sin brings to light a "fait originaire qui échappe aux prises de la conscience réflexive parce qu'il est à la racine de toute conscience possible et qu'il coïncide avec une rupture spirituelle constitutive d'un moi singulier". And "chacune de nos fautes [...] est comme la répétition de cette rupture dans la perspective des actes rapportés à nos libres initiatives". Original secession, original fact: in the same terms, i.e., as an original separation, the secession of consciousnesses will be defined. Facing the rejection and fracture of the being we are, sin enables to comprehend it, helping to shed light on the origin of the subject.

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42 See EM 90.
43 EM 88.
44 EM 94.
45 See EM 95–96. The italics is ours.
46 EM 96.
Sin, it is true, is always identified in relation to the contravention of one norm or another. But neither absolution for the wrongdoing nor the remedy with which we face the evil suffered can erase the most profound uneasiness, the uneasiness of breaking the link with the truth of self. In this perspective, the distinction between a good man and a bad man, even if not eliminated, takes on a different meaning because the bad man is none other than someone whose own deed has revealed an even more radical perversion of freedom. One is astonished for being the protagonist of an act as cruel as it is indulged by the complicity of a secret will that seemed to await, by the subject, just a signal to witness itself. The freedom with which the act is accomplished would seem, in reality, only to concretize an “initial” freedom which is a complacency of the ego for itself, from which it cannot be stripped, except by renouncing itself and to what makes it spring it as a subject. And the fact that this complacency to the self is enacted by our freedom is, for the bad man as well as for those who have not done the bad deed, the signal that the true refusal is that made in regard to of the pure ego that inhabits subjectivity, of the true self, and that freedom is rooted in a causality through of which we are always on the verge of sin. By manifesting this causality of ours, impure in its origin even before it is guilty of the act, sin “comprehended through reflection” shows that the ego, before a norm, is opposed to itself. The breaking of this bond traces the steps of the separation with which subjectivity springs and which is further explored in the analysis of the evil of secession.

In Eléments pour une éthique, Nabert makes a parallelism between the pure consciousness and the empirical consciousness, between the One and the plurality of consciousnesses, stating that pure consciousness is for empirical consciousness as the One is for the plurality of consciousnesses. It is the common derivation of consciousnesses; it is what establishes and allows their communication in the shape of a mutual relationship of exchange, a relationship that consciousnesses entertain with each other in a reciprocity on which they feed. This reciprocity once again brings the discourse into the sphere of the origin of subjectivity. Self-consciousness, in fact, “est corollaire d’un group d’actes qui nont d’abord de sens que l’un par l’autre et l’un pour l’autre, avant

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47 The blurring of the borders separating the good from the evil is the core matter of the study by P. Levert, De la confession des péchés ou la dénonciation du Pharisaïs selon Jean Nabert, “Revue de sciences religieuses” XLIV (1970), pp. 288–317.
48 In the Essai sur le mal Nabert re-proposes the same parallelism on page 118.
de prendre leur origine en deux pôles distincts"; and still, “ces rapports ne se
dissocient qu’aux frontières de la communication". The elements of commu-
nication, the call and the response, are already a first fracturing of unity, a frac-
turing that is accentuated at the moment when each consciousness becomes
individual consciousness. Moreover, the same arise of consciousness creates, as
such, this fracture, without which, however, we would not speak of subjectivi-
ty. It is not a matter of a fall from an initial unit, as it was not for the pure and
empirical consciousness: the One lies in the experience of the communication
of consciousnesses and affirms itself only in this communication.

The fracture of subjectivity, therefore, is not an outcome but it is the very
possibility of the One affirming itself, as we have seen with the original affirma-
tion. This is demonstrated by the dual alternative that opens up to conscious-
nesses following this secession: either conceiving oneself together with others
as the means of promoting communication guided by the experience of the
certainty of an absolute presence and witnessed by the security of mutual influ-
ence, or, and this is the second alternative, deepening the original secession.
The evil of secession follows the traces of the separation of consciousnesses
between them and from the principle that establishes their unity. As the One
is the “reality” that is at the origin of the relationship, it will follow that “il
n’y a d’ennemi, d’adversaire ou d’étranger, pris absolument, que par la rupture
d’une relation où des consciences avaient commencé de se reconnaître, sous le
signe de quelque unité spirituelle”. Withdrawing from every relationship, for
the self, will mean then “s’explier de ce qui fait son être, mais c’est correlative-
ment constituer l’autre comme autre, absolument, c’est s’exclure et s’exclure de
toute participation à l’unité qui fondait aussi bien l’accord que l’opposition des
consciences”. The most radical evil – the polar opposite of the idea of the fall
from a principle, from one res – is in this finitude.

49 EE 163.
50 EM 118.
51 For this reason see EE 161–181.
52 See EM 111 ss.
53 EM 115.
54 EM 115–116.
8. The evil of secession and the finitude of the subject

With the evil of secession, an evil that reveals the finitude of the subject, the parable announced with the ébauche dated in ’34 is accomplished, this parable marks the search for the meaning of the self that consciousness can comprehend and for which it can comprehend itself. The paradox of evil lies precisely in the denial of this comprehension, in the negation of the true self. Here then “le mal originaire est dans cette finitude, et l’on conçoit que chacune d’elles soit plus pressée de se sauver en remontant vers son principe que de se comprendre par les autres consciences, et par le principe d’unité immanent à leur reconnaissance réciproque.” This identification of evil with the finitude was the theme of the “dialogue” between Jean Nabert and Paul Ricoeur, which he published in the journal in the *Esprit* (1957) one of the most important studies dedicated to the *Essai sur le mal.*

Focusing on the Nabertian *quaestio,* Ricoeur criticises the “constant tendency of the book to identify the individuation of consciousness with evil,” that is to reduce finitude to evil. This reduction, *de facto,* would not differ much from the inverse, expressly criticised by Nabert, through which one would like to assimilate evil to finitude. The *Essai sur le mal* does not end, as we will see soon, with the affirmation of the negativity of the multiplicity of consciousness but opens, in a perspective that Ricoeur defined *christique,* to the metaphysics of witnessing as the only way to think of the justification of the difference between the plurality of consciousnesses themselves. The problem raised by Ricoeur does not concern so much the *a posteriori* of the manifold but the origin of their difference. For Ricoeur, we need to separate evil and finitude because only in this way the “original plurality of personal vocations and envy (*jalousie*) that isolates and opposes consciousnesses” can be separated. In this way not only would the negativity of evil be preserved, which led Nabert to identify evil and finitude, but the positivity of subjectivities would also be maintained. The only alternative that can be opposed to the Nabertian one, and equally radical about the definition of the peremptoriness of evil, would then be to explain the positivity of the *plusieurs* with a myth that allows

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55 EM 120.
56 It appeared for the first time in “Esprit” XII (1957), pages 124–135, retaken and completed *Lectures 2. La contrée des philosophes,* Paris 1992, pp. 237–252 (this second one is the text to whom our quotations refer to).
57 Ibidem, p. 248.
not to identify finitude and evil, a myth irremplaçable, irreplaceable, which has the task of maintaining “the gap between the “original” – and originally good – principle of the difference of consciousnesses is the “historical” principle with which this difference becomes “immediately” the preference that every consciousness has in its regard and from which it pursues the death of the other”.38 From this point of view, the fall would be, then, a leap from the differences to the preference, a hiatus between the finitude and the evil that no system can ever fill and “unjustifiable par excellence”. An unjustifiable that, in Nabert, it is an excess witnessed by the impossibility of the subject to equalise his being to the original affirmation that through his act is affirmed.

We easily grasp the considerable divergences between the open road from Essai sur le mal and what Ricoeur develops extensively in Finitude et culpabilité and that are only hinted at in the note in question. Beyond the debate that could be raised about the two positions, it seems to us that the re-reading of the Nabertian position in the light of the ethical vision of evil – a vision in which this is introduced – can make an important contribution to this dialogue. The identification of finitude and evil can be read as the last result of the ethical vision of evil in which, rightly, Ricoeur first placed our philosopher. However, we would risk failing to appreciate the meaning of this rereading if we did not even worry about recovering the debt of Essai sur le mal towards Kant and in particular of Kantian radical evil.

9. Nabert “after” Kant

The Essai sur le mal closes with the Note on radical evil in Kant. Besides the explicit reference of this note, in the writings of Nabert, the presence of the philosopher of Königsberg, next to that of Fichte and Main de Biran, is constant.39 In fact, we recall that Kantian criticism is one of the most important sources of “arbre de la philosophie réflexive”40 and in particular of this philosophie réflexive. Among Nabert’s multiple debts to Kant, the analysis of evil gives explicit testimony of a lineage that led the Kantian view of evil beyond the conclusions it had reached. The clarification of some of the points of contact between the

38 Ibidem, p. 249.
39 We remind that the essay L’expérience interne chez Kant is dated in 1924.
40 This is the title of the preface by Ricoeur to the last issue of EL V–XXVI.
two philosophers will serve to clarify the terms of this lineage and its over-
coming.  

Among the studies that examined the relationship between *Essai sur le mal* and the *Essay on radical evil*, we must recall those of Jacques Baulay and Pierre Watté. Both agree that both the French philosopher and the philosopher of Königsberg have submitted to the philosophical critique the representation of what in theology is called “original sin” turning it into “radical evil”. Both Nabert and Kant also affirmed the peremptory nature of evil by rooting it in the subject and in freedom. Now, the path taken by the two philosophers begins to diverge precisely on the basis of the outcome of this rooting. Kantian radical evil is the evil of a subject that is sensibility and reason, freedom and practical reason. Evil consists in the corruption of the “subjective foundation” of the use of freedom for which “one takes the motive of love to oneself and one’s actions as the condition of the fulfilment of moral laws”. In Nabert, however, that finitude defined as “the most original evil” is the origin of subjectivity. And yet, in Kant radical evil as a tendency to evil is “the formal condition of any illegal fact which, as regards the matter, is opposed to the law” – an illegal fact that is called “vice” (*peccatum derivatum*), *factum phaenomenon*, whose relationship with the first original evil is the same as that between the phenomenon and the noumenon, which is why the original evil is called the “intelligible fact”. However, for Nabert historical evil arises the *amazement* of those who do it, an amazement motivated and justified by the strange discovery to which it leads. In fact, it reveals to the subject a causality that otherwise would escape him. Finally, radical evil, both in Kant and in Nabert, is an unfathomable enigma for reason. But while the former stops when faced with the confession of the im-
penetrability of the nature of evil, Nabert discovers its heuristic power that lets us comprehend the core of subjectivity, a comprehension reflexively guided by

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61 About the relationship Kant–Nabert we limit to remind that the *Essai sur le mal* is quoted by M.M. Olivetti in the introduction to the Italian edition to I. Kant, *La religione entro i limiti della sola ragione* (Sari 1985) as an example of the attention risen by the topic of radical evil by Kant in the contemporary philosophy (ibidem, p. XXIX).


63 I. Kant, *La religione entro i limiti della sola ragione*, pp. 37–38.

64 Ibidem, p. 31.

65 Ibidem.
that self that prohibits the solution of evil. But, let us remember, our first intention was to read the identification of finitude and evil from the perspective of debt and the overcoming of ethical vision in which, precisely along the lines of Kant, Nabert introduces himself.

In the essay *Hermeneutics of symbols and philosophical reflection*, Paul Ricoeur recalls that “historically the ethical vision of evil carries the stamp of two great names […] Augustine and Kant”. Of the original Augustinian sin, Ricoeur emphasises the “obscure analogical richness” whose force “lies in intentionally referring back to what is most radical in the confession of sins, namely, the fact that evil precedes my awareness, that it cannot be analyzed into individual faults, that it is my pre-given impotence”. And, developing the outcome of this position, “if evil is at the radical level of the "generation" […] conversion itself is regeneration. Thus is constituted, by means of an absurd concept, an anti-type of regeneration; because of this anti-type, will is shown to be affected by a passive constitution implied in its current power of deliberation and of choice”. Continuing along this path opened up by Augustine and making of that anti-type of regeneration “the a priori of the moral life”, Kant then deepens the conception of an evil of nature understood “as the possibility of negative maxims, as their ground”.

In the Kantian hypothesis, evil is “a manner of being of freedom that comes to it from freedom”. In this sense Ricoeur notes that “evil, which always begins by freedom, is already there for freedom: it is act and habit, arising and antecedence”. Even the most rigorous ethical vision of evil must, then, come to terms with an origin that the choice of freedom meets, and which is not, at first, desired. A nature that freedom comes to comprehend by comprehending itself.

How is the *vision éthique* of Nabert introduced on the lines of those of Augustine and Kant? Is it also touched by this last observation that reveals that

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71 Ibidem.
72 Ibidem, p. 308.
there is no freedom that is not already undermined by evil? In reality, this ethical vision is perhaps even more rigorous than the previous ones and can evade the risk identified thanks to the identification of finitude and evil. Nabet scrutinises the abyss of the birth of freedom, placing it since the thèse of '24 in the consciousness as free and impure causality because it is the causality of an empirical consciousness, finite. Finitude that is evil, that does not connote subjectivity, but it is its origin. Therefore in Nabet, rather than freedom undermined at the origin, it is about act of the causality impure at the origin, an impurity that is the causality of consciousness and that, since the Éléments pour une éthique, leads and gives substance to what, next to evil and the experiences of negativity, is the other great pole in which the value of Nabertian work is played: how is it possible to justify what by its very nature is unjustifiable? The problem of identifying finitude and evil remains, it is true, and this is, perhaps, the greatest limit of Nabert's ethical vision of evil. But it is perhaps even more interesting, the final perspective that this identification opens up, that is, the attempt to think of a justification, and therefore a relationship between the consciousnesses, which cannot be denudation — impossible, or even contradictory — of subjectivity, invokes the testimony of those who testify that that absolute, whose traces have been willingly ignored by the secession of consciousnesses, has always left its presence felt when the bonds were interrupted, a testimony that appeals a cause in which the life of the ego is at stake. Can the problem of finitude as evil enable us to think a justification that is not an attempt to divest this subject? The witness of the absolute would be entrusted with the difficult task of reconstructing the essence of a subjectivity which, born as a gap between the absolute and the concrete, it recognises and recovers, through the extrinsic way of the witness, the intrinsic absolute that inhabits it.

10. From unjustifiable evil to possible justification

The attempts and possibilities offered to the ego to approach the justification of the evil done are the object of the fifth chapter of Essai sur le mal, where the problem of justification is placed together with that of regeneration. Already in '43 Nabet, speaking of the relationship between the ego and its past, spoke of "desire for regeneration," as an invincible aspiration that prevents the consciousness from thinking that any hope of regeneration of its being is
forbidden to it.\textsuperscript{73} This desire, linked to comprehension, conveys as a desire for not considering the splitting off of subjectivity as definitive, that the ego can be reborn and follow the upward movement inspired by the absolute affirmation that inhabits it. However, as we know, the unjustifiable is such not only in the relationship of the ego with oneself, but above all in relation to other consciousnesses. The tragedy of each of the decisions made by evil is given by “fonction de l'intensité avec laquelle la forme de l'absolu spirituel se saisit dans une conscience particulière et, aussi bien, saisit cette dernière au milieu des circonstances contingentes de l'expérience humaine”\textsuperscript{74}

The identification of finitude with evil precludes, in itself, the road to the two alternatives, perhaps the most common and recurrent, with which the justification has been thought, i.e. the recourse to the moral law and the forgiveness of the evil done.\textsuperscript{75} As for the first solution, we know that it cannot motivate the unjustifiable. The exclusion of the proposed second hypothesis, that of forgiveness, is more complex. The desire for justification is the desire by that subject to which evil has revealed its finitude. Therefore, it cannot be traced back to the hypothesis of an abdication of evil that would not however heal the wound generated by the fracture of the being with which the Ego is born. For the same reasons, moreover, justification is not, or at least it is not only, regeneration. The latter is a new birth,\textsuperscript{76} while the first collides with a suffering that closes the ego within itself, preventing all hope. Forgiveness does not motivate the link with the origin violently interrupted, which is the reason why something more is needed, i.e. “un crédit effectivement ouvert au compte du malheureux et du méchant”.\textsuperscript{77} It is necessary that those acts which have introduced the unjustifiable into history are “taken onboard” by another consciousness that re-establishes, as far as possible, “un équilibre spirituel, à la faveur duquel le coupable souvre à un espoir de régénération et le malheureux à une expérience compensatrice”.\textsuperscript{78} The consciousness, taking another onboard, takes on

\textsuperscript{73} The being of the ego is defined, is constituted thanks to these two relationships: relationship to a past where always, at some level, its freedom is implied, relationship to a principle where it gets its desire for existence and its strength of regeneration (EE 15).

\textsuperscript{74} EM 155.

\textsuperscript{75} On forgiveness see P. Levert, \textit{De la confession des péchés}, p. 311 and, by the same author, \textit{Jean Nabert. Une philosophie de l'intériorité pure}, “Archives de philosophie” XXXI (1968), pp. 355-416; the pages 385-394 are expressly devoted to forgiveness.

\textsuperscript{76} See EM 134.

\textsuperscript{77} EM 165.

\textsuperscript{78} EM 165.
a negativity that is still its own. At the same time, however, this becomes the living hope that, in history, the traces of the One of which we experience in the relationships that consciousnesses maintain with each other do not get lost.

The “desire for justification” recovers the space that belonged to the exchange, to the mutual trading of consciousnesses, a space shattered by the secession that made communication incomprehensible. This space is recovered by accomplishing an act that is hope witnessed by men who, in their lives, attest to the presence of the absolute, they are the witnesses to the absolute with whom we are allowed to “mesurer la différence de notre être propre”\textsuperscript{79}. The topic of witnessing is only mentioned in these final pages of \textit{Essai sur le mal} but finds ample space in the pages of \textit{Le désir de Dieu}, where Nabert expressly thematised his metaphysics of witness recovering and deepening the notions developed in previous works, following a singular path that goes from the desire for regeneration, to the desire for God and to the One's desire. The witness of the absolute attests that that ego whose finitude is identified with evil can arrive in the proximity of justification; he attests, with an “excess” just as hyperbolic as that of the unjustifiability of evil,\textsuperscript{80} that there is a possibility given to the finitude to not despairing despite the evil done and that, indeed, the possibility that another man accepts our being, is always present, without it being necessary for it to be stripped of itself. And it is always present because it is the same one, the same absolute denied in the moment of secession and confirmed in the reciprocity of relationships.

With the metaphysics of witness, Jean Nabert completes the path of self-comprehension of the subject, indicating that the path that finitude invites us to follow is not that of attempting its elimination but that it can and must be taken on, borne by the ego with an act by which the other is recognised as a means of one’s own justification, a meta-moral experience of a completely different order, but an order which founds the subject. Inspecting the finitude of subjectivity, Nabert has given a reading that eludes, as he himself reminds us in the concluding pages of this work, both the easy optimism of the solution of the evil committed and the pessimism that condemns every man. But perhaps, just by avoiding this alternative, the subjectivity wounded by evil, wounded at the origin because it is finished, can ask to be accepted by the other and to

\textsuperscript{79} EM 170.

\textsuperscript{80} This is the suggestive relecture of the \textit{Essai sur le mal} proposed by Ricoeur in Lectures 2 (pp. 249–252).
re-initiate, both after the evil done and after the one suffered. The identification of finitude and evil still remains problematic and difficult; it is, however, a difficulty that enables the justification to be placed within a subjectivity for which a horizon opens up after that the evil seemed to have closed it definitively. The experience is "other" than evil, but not "other" than the subject.