

The birth of language or the necessity of rule

Jean-Paul Martinon

Goldsmiths, University of London

j.martinon@gold.ac.uk

Abstract

As is well known, the biblical sixth commandment, “Thou shall not kill”, is intimately linked to the First Commandment, “I am the Lord”. By linking the two at the top of Moses’s two-column table, language is given priority: the name of God can be uttered only when the possibility of death has been set aside. In this way, the linking of these two commandments marks not only the birth of language, but also, more importantly, the start of ethics. As such, commandments one and six form the basis of practically all Western ethics from Kant’s categorical imperative (the unconditional maxim needs a First Word to enter into force) to Lyotard’s language games (for which all utterances are charged with the moral imperative to respond), for example. But how on earth does this famous linguistic and ethical structure fare in a context whereby the written text is not given priority, in a situation where prohibitions are inherited orally? This paper will attempt to expose the thorny issue of the role of the sixth commandment in the context of Rwanda. This will imply neither the exposition of the history of the arrival of the Bible in Rwanda nor the way it helped to consolidate the colonial regime. This paper will also not examine the neglect of the prohibition against murder during the genocide of 1994. Instead, the essay will examine the linguistic and cultural problems one faces when determining the birth of ethics in two radically different contexts.

Keywords: First and sixth commandments, Ethics, Oral tradition, Rwanda, Rwandan prohibitions

Introduction

When I was researching the idea of peace in Rwanda between 2006 and 2013 (Martinon 2013), I stumbled upon an unexpected problem: how is one to interpret the biblical sixth commandment (“Thou shall not kill”) in a Rwandan context? The problem was not so much a historical one: for example, how did the Bible impose itself in Rwanda and how did the prohibition against murder become accepted by all Rwandese? The history of the arrival of the White Fathers in East Africa, for example, explains at least partially this imposition of the Bible and of its prohibitions.¹ So this wasn’t the issue. The problem was not so much a socio-political and religious one either: for example, why did the prohibition against murder end up being so ignored during the genocide? The infamous and controversial saying by a Rwandan bishop after the end of the

1 For one of the most remarkable accounts of the relationship between the White Fathers, the colonial regimes, and the kingdom of Rwanda, see Des Forges-Liebhafsky 2011.

genocide that Rwandese are more Catholics than they are Christians could explain to some degree this overwhelmingly thorny issue.² So again, this wasn't the issue. The problem was really a philosophical one about the origins of ethics: on the one hand, there is a *written* Judaeo-Christian prohibition against murder and on the other, there is a whole range of Rwandan prohibitions, passed on *orally* between generations, none of which specifically target the act of murder.³

The problem was therefore more than just a question of historical, political, cultural, or religious heritage – the problem was eminently philosophical: on what should ethics be based – on what is written or what is transmitted orally? If we go for the former (the written), then we abide, as we will see, not only by the entire Abrahamic tradition, for which the Word is placed centre-stage in any discussion of ethics, but also by the entire history of Western ethics (or moral philosophy) from Kant's categorical imperative (his unconditional maxim needs the rational written order to enter into force⁴) to all contemporary moral principles, whether in normative or applied ethics: they all rely on the force of generality of written commandments, principles, rules, or maxims. If we go with the latter (the oral), then what ethical imperative against murder do oral societies, and Rwanda specifically, abide by? If, for example, someone says orally in Kinyarwanda, “Injunga y'urulimi inesha injunga z'igitero” (The sharpness of the tongue defeats the sharpness of the warriors)⁵ can it be enough to stop the blade? In other words, what is it exactly that enjoins the respect of the imperative not to kill, if it is not just the fear of being incarcerated by a legal system based on colonial and post-colonial written laws?

In order to address this complex issue, I will first look briefly at the structure of the sixth commandment not in a religious or historical context, but a philosophical one. I will then explore the long-lived systems of prohibitions in Rwanda. The aim of this juxtaposition is not so much to question the strength or validity of either system (written or oral), but to highlight the problem we face when thinking the start of ethics, the point at which ethics needs to be taken in consideration.

The Judaeo-Christian sixth commandment

As is well known, the biblical prohibition against murder⁶ constitutes in the Old Testament what has come to be seen as the first Word. As the talmudic scholar, Marc-Alain Ouaknin, explains:

According to the Talmud, the disposition of Moses's table aims to put in relation or correspondence each of the five commandments: five on each

2 On this topic, see Longman 2011.

3 On the oral tradition of Rwanda see, amongst others, Crépeau 1985 and Biruka 2010.

4 On this topic, see Nancy 1983, and in English, Nancy 2003: 133–51.

5 “Language is as dangerous as a weapon”, Crépeau and Bizimana (1979, proverb no. 1602: 239). All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

6 For a clear account of the problems associated with this biblical commandment, see Bailey 2005.

side. The sixth commandment thus corresponds to the first one, “I am the Lord, thy God . . .” For this reason, commentators would say that “you shall not kill” means “you shall not kill the way in which your God revealed Himself and said ‘I am.’” The sixth commandment can thus be translated with: “You shall not kill the ‘I am’” (Ouaknin 1999: 122).

By linking the two commandments at the top of Moses’ two-column table, it is clear that the Old Testament wanted to show that language is what needs to be given priority: the name of God (on the left) can be read, uttered, and repeated *only* when the possibility of death (on the right) has been set aside. In other words, there can be no word without at the same time a prohibition against murder. The two columns are therefore strategically headed by the declaration of divine expression against the possibility of death.

However, this is not all. What this heading also demonstrates is that the juxtaposition of the first and sixth commandments not only gives priority and importance to language, it also inaugurates the birth of Western subjectivity, both in its godly and human acceptations. On the one hand, there is a divine assertion: “*I am* the Lord, thy God”. On the other, there is also, through this divine statement and the adjoining suggestion not to kill, another subject: “I am (potentially murderous)”. How is this so? Basically, the *explicit* positing of the sovereignty of the divine subject also suggests, through the opening provided by the sixth commandment, the *implicit* possibility of the mortal subject on the right. The two subjects are clearly announced at the top of Moses’ tables: one in its assertive statement, the other in its inferred potential. In this way, the Word is given to us splintered, God on the left, mortals on the right, the two clearly showing that the positing of the subject is overall *explicitly* always divine, but it is also *implicitly* potentially murderous. The Western subject appears here as if an unmentionable corollary statement of fact that can never be reconciled: divine, but also potentially evil.

The intertwining between the birth of God, the subject, and language has never been better exposed than in the metonymy of the face put forward by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who says, for example: “This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’” (Levinas 1969: 198–9). With this complex sentence, Levinas intertwines, following the Old Testament, the infinity of God with human finitude and inscribes the commandment right at the heart of the very constitution of subjectivity. Let’s unpack Levinas’s statement. Before being a subject, “I am” is indeed a face. However, because this face breaks open the possibility of the new and thereby introduces the radically Other or God, “it” is also “I am the Lord”. The two cannot be distinguished with much clarity. The face introduces God as he or she pronounces His word. But the interface “I am” / “I am the Lord” cannot take place without a prohibition splintering the two. It is, as we have seen, what guarantees its taking place. Finitude and infinity thus clash right in the metonymy of the face, with infinity always on the strong side, and finitude always prone to murder. In this way, subjectivity, God, and language come together and in order to take place, they each need to thwart the very possibility of death itself.

The curious thing about this link between the first and sixth commandments is the fact that although it inaugurates God, the subject, and language, it also raises the question of exception: what are the circumstances in which either subject (God or mortals) is permitted to kill, who can really avoid the commandment and get away with murder. This is what the futural modal verb (“shall”) implies: the Commandment can be broken. As Jean-François Lyotard, this assiduous reader of Levinas has shown, “Thou Shall Not Kill” does not call for peace, it raises instead the question of exception. As he says: “The prescription ‘thou shalt not kill’ has always been festooned with exceptions, and all these exceptions have implied ‘thou shalt kill’” (Lyotard 1985: 63). The question, of course, is then this: what circumstances permit killing or murder? To look for these exceptions in the Bible (and they are many!) would be pointless, because these do not address the issue raised by Moses’ unexplained and unjustified futural suggestion that killing is “not a good idea”. Juxtaposed with the positing of divine sovereignty, the tacit exceptions implied posit in fact the issue of freedom: both divine and mortal subjects are free to determine these exceptions. This freedom is not a state, but the setting-off of the sovereign subjects (divine and mortal) in their search for morality. In this way, the headings of Moses’ tables inaugurate the freedom of both subjects to ethical self-determination.

Ultimately, these two arguments by Levinas and Lyotard help us to see that the biblical pairing “I am” / “Thou Shall Not Kill” can never be paradoxically *above* the law; it is, on the contrary, *the start* of all laws, of all moral statements, and of all ethical decisions as to what is good or bad. In other words, the first two lines on Moses’s table give us not a law on how to live righteously (obeying God and not murdering anyone, for example), but how the law should start: it should start with the realization that we are always already in a free state of deliberation: “I am” / “Thou Shall Not Kill”, a deliberation that authorizes, as Jacques Derrida says in his own oblique reading of the Commandment, “every ethical law in general” (Derrida 2001: 99). In this way, *because they are written*, Moses’s tables are therefore not moral instructions, they are an offering to debate. That’s their point. They demand that we, as sovereign subjects, ponder the meaning *written* on these tablets of stones; reflect not only on who we are, but also on how we relate to this divine being who announces Himself and what happens if we abandon Him and kill (ourselves or) another. In sum, the first two lines of the tables do not put forward a set of principles to follow, they concretize the necessity of ethical reflection, which is nothing other than the concretization of the freedom of the sovereign subject.

As all this hopefully shows, the two short enigmatic sentences forming the heading of Moses’ tables rest on the power of the written word. It is from this writing and this formal typesetting that the necessity of ethics emerges. There is no getting out of this. These simple words not only determine the other commandments in the rest of the tables, they also inaugurate every written code and law in most countries in the world, including both those which do not have formal constitutions and those which have sternly divorced themselves from any religion. Both the subject in all its sovereignty and the imperative to refrain from killing are the cornerstone of every modern nation on earth and this even if they do not strictly abide by them. Now the question is inevitably this: what happens when the written is secondary to the oral relations? What

happens to this written biblical call for interpretation in a country, like Rwanda,⁷ that has only passed from an oral tradition to a written one in the last 150 years? In order to address these questions, let me first explore briefly the way Rwanda's oral tradition understands prescriptions against murder.

2. Kirazira!⁸

Rwanda once had a whole set of oral prohibitions, called (*umuziro*, plural *imiziro*), that regulated the lives of particular groups of people and specific individuals. The *imiziro* were indeed imposed on to specifically targeted groups, like women,⁹ hunters, landowners, etc. and to particular individuals, such as the king, court clerks, heads of clans, etc.¹⁰ Although the population largely ignores them today, anthropologists continue to highlight the fact that many Rwandese still rely on them even in a globalized modern and secular environment. As the anthropologist Danielle de Lame, for example, remarks with regard to the space of the Rwandan home (*urugo*):

Even if space as defined culturally by the *imiziro* ritual prescriptions and prohibitions has been largely rejected, related beliefs continue to suffuse the everyday life of Rwandese ... very few are indifferent to them.¹¹

In this way, although it is no longer possible to generalize today about Rwandan prohibitions or explain them within the context of a complex and long-established animist system,¹² it is therefore clearly a fact that “in some cases these may still swing the register of meaning for many Rwandese from reality to efficient symbolism”.¹³ How are we then to understand the need to evade murder in this complex system of oral prohibitions?¹⁴

- 7 I leave aside here, for lack of time, an important analysis with regards to the juxtaposition between monotheism (and its written commandments) and Rwanda's multivalent apprehension of God under the name *Imana*. If this were a book, it would then be necessary to analyse the conflation divine/mortal subjectivity, language, and prohibition against murder and to contrast it with a non-monotheistic society and culture. As I said, my aim here is not theological or historical, but ethical, however much it is difficult to distinguish the two properly speaking.
- 8 “It is forbidden!” Alexis Kagame uses this expression in this context: “If you ask a Rwandan: ‘Can you marry your sister?’ He will reply: *ntibishōbōka, kirazira!* = ‘This is not feasible: it’s forbidden!’” (Kagame 1956: 381).
- 9 “Women were subjected to more ritual rules (*imiziro*) than men. This is because their human condition, evidenced in speech, just barely conceded to them (now as before), transgressed their culturally assigned role as vehicle.” (de Lame 2005: 439).
- 10 See de Lame 2004: 288–9.
- 11 de Lame 2005: 86, translation modified. See also de Lame 2004: 288.
- 12 For such an analysis, see Gasarabwe 1978; and 1993: 31–3.
- 13 de Lame 2005: 34, translation modified.
- 14 I am obviously aware that Rwanda is a predominantly Christian country (as of 2012, Catholics represented 43.7%, Protestants 37.7% – of whom 11.8% were Seventh Day Adventists – Muslims 2%, while 1.3% claimed no religious beliefs). The idea is only intended to challenge the logic of the Commandment's articulating principle.

What transpires from all the literature on Rwandan prohibitions¹⁵ is that there appears to be no *specific* prohibition against murder.¹⁶ In other words, the idea of a biblical sixth commandment appears to be inconceivable not because murder is allowed or because Rwandese have little regard for life, but for two specific reasons as outlined below.

The first reason is simply that it is not possible to conceive in Kinyarwanda something so generic, general, or primary and then apply it to all. The Rwandan language and culture simply does not permit it.¹⁷ Outside of a Judaeo-Christian context – if this were at all possible today in Rwanda – a prohibition against murder would be hinted at within the context of specific prohibitions such as those defining relationships between individuals or groups of individuals.¹⁸ In the past, for example, Rwandese could take women or children hostage, but not kill them; in another context, they could kill a man, but not when entering someone's home, where, crucially, hospitality would supersede mortal disputes. When building a new house, the oral tradition called upon the new home-owner to bury the rope that served to delimit the boundary with a fruit (*umutanga*) in order to ward off all possible ills that might befall it (theft, murder, arson, etc.).¹⁹ As these examples show, the lack of specificity prevents anyone from formulating a commandment as a generic form of moral imperative applicable not only in all situations, but also to all subjects understood irrespective of their gender, clan, or their socio-economic or professional standing. The first reason there is no single Rwandan prohibition or saying that directly tackles the problem of murder is therefore that the multiplicity of contexts in which the death of someone might occur simply does not permit it. There are effectively far too many exceptions or contexts for anything so generic, thus invalidating any legitimacy to the prohibition, even if it is conceived as hypothetically to-come (“Shall”).

Second, because in Rwanda, a prohibition against murder could not focus on the sole responsibility of a sinful individual,²⁰ but on the responsibility of the group or collectivity.²¹ As many anthropologists have noted, the idea of “sin” and therefore of an individual's transgression against a divine law did not exist prior to the arrival of White Fathers in East Africa. In this way, unlike the sixth commandment, which focuses on targeting both the guilt and responsibility of the *one* person who transgresses it,²² Rwandan prohibitions against

15 For such a literature see, amongst others, Bigirimwami 1983; 1987, and Kagame 1954.

16 This was confirmed to me in an exchange of emails with Charles Ntampaka, lawyer and expert in Rwandan law and society. I thank him once more for his help.

17 On this, see Balibusta 2000b: 181.

18 For a more comprehensive list of prohibitions see, amongst others, Pagès 1933: 407–14; Sandrart 1951; Bourgeois 1954–58; and Nothomb 1965: 195–200.

19 On this rite, called “kutanga umulozi nu mwanzi” see Nothomb 1965: 116.

20 The common biblical use of the singular pronoun “thou” instead of the plural “ye” attests quite simply to this singularity.

21 “In the non-Christian Central African thought, the idea of sin in a Christian sense does not exist” (Nothomb 1965: 105). Nothomb also quotes Aloysius Bigirimwami who, in *Imihango y'imigenzo n'iyi'imizilirizo* (Diocese of Nyundo, 1964), confirms that non-Christian Rwandese could never have conceived of the idea of sin (Nothomb 1965: 105, fn. 52).

22 For the way the sixth commandment has progressively become a prohibition against individual murder and not killing in general, see Bailey 2005.

murder involve everyone concerned, that is, everyone in the family (*Imilyango*), clan (*Ubwoko*), or lineage (*Umuryango*)²³ in which a murder has taken place. This is evidenced in the way crimes are understood, even in some cases, to this day: if one person commits a crime, all members of the particular lineage or group feel obliged to take on the responsibility for the crime. A parricide, for example, is a crime that calls for the entire family of the perpetrator to follow specific rituals of purification.²⁴ The consequence of this is that the feeling of belonging to a lineage or group necessarily lessens the answerability or responsibility of the one individual vis-à-vis the crime itself.²⁵ In this context, a generic prohibition applicable to all would then be, once again, unnecessary.

So if I take on board these two specific reasons, the issue then becomes a little more complex, especially if we include prohibitions not only against murder specifically, but also prohibitions aimed at protecting life as well, for example, those imposed on pregnant women and their husbands.²⁶ One way to clarify the issue is perhaps to look at the crucial temporal dimension of these Rwandan prohibitions. For Rwandese, an *umuziro* is something that either *falls* down upon its unexpected victim or *remains* as a daily hindrance or inconvenience.²⁷ As Pierre Smith says:

When one asks Rwandese why one should try to avoid transgressing *imiziro* ... they usually give two types of answers, one that refers to the past and the other to the future: “because we inherited from our fathers”, or “because it is bound to bring misfortune” (Smith 1979: 18).

The hesitation between inheritance and the provocation of an unhappy future highlights the pivotal temporal dimension of the prohibition: *imiziro* are there to ensure that the present takes place *unencumbered* by the vicissitudes imposed or inflicted by times *not belonging* to it: a past which might not even be remembered or a future which even prediction or projection might not necessarily clarify. In other words, *imiziro* consolidates the present by rendering it free of any (known or unknown) inheritance or expectation.

This explains the Rwandan philosopher Alexis Kagame’s startling and seemingly paradoxical claim that one can transgress an *umuziro* without awareness. They fall upon the Rwandese, even if he or she is not aware of them. As he writes:

The one who transgresses a prohibition exposes him or herself to be punished. However, this punishment can take place immediately after the prohibition is transgressed or long after. This uncertainty means that the

23 For pre-colonial Rwanda see Kagame 1954: 77–80 and Maquet 1954.

24 As Nothomb remarks, corroborating Kagame’s earlier analysis: “If a member of a family [or clan] killed someone not belonging to this family [or clan], every male member of the family would feel collectively responsible for this murder” (Nothomb 1965: 170).

25 This should obviously not be seen to explain the Rwandan genocide. Any reductive view of this nature can only distort the tragedy that occurred in 1994. For the way this consequence is drawn, see Nothomb 1965: 173.

26 Example given to me by Charles Ntampaka.

27 On this, see Dufays and de Moor 1938. On this state of fear, see de Lame 1997: 157–77.

person at fault does not necessarily realize his or her crime: one can transgress a prohibition without knowing it. This means that the prohibition does not necessarily imply knowledge or free-will (Kagame 1956: 384).

The issue here is not one of consciousness versus unconsciousness²⁸ or that in any given situation a prohibition can potentially be transgressed. The issue is simply that prohibitions take place irrespective of the subject, that is, irrespective of the “I am”. They concern the family, clan, or lineage understood as what precisely stretches itself out in time over and beyond the everyday of the individual affected. *Imiziro* thus regulate a social present thick with an immemorial past and an unknowable future that no single Rwandese could possibly fathom in their entirety, let alone regulate with a blanket truism applicable to all.

The outcome of Rwandan prohibitions is therefore not the potential culpability of someone who might transgress a generic law (the “shall” of the Sixth commandment), but the intermittent state of worry that the family, clan, or lineage undergoes. The worry is indeed that any one of its members accidentally transgresses a prohibition or an observance (*kwandagaza*). This general state of worry can never be overcome precisely because of the atemporal nature of the social-present involved: ancestors and descendants who might still also be involved in forcing the living to abide by prohibitions. This explains the famous Rwandan proverb: “Kuba I Rwanda ni ukwizirira” (To be in Rwanda is to intermittently evade what is prohibited).²⁹ This proverb effectively means that *to be* a Rwandese represents an irregular state of *responsibility* to the family, clan, or lineage on the basis of pre-existing prohibitions that are for a large part forgotten or unknown and that can suddenly fall down as if from out of time. Individual sin is here replaced by the group’s general sense of worry that only a common effort of mutual support can attenuate.

There is one major consequence to the ghostly character of these Rwandan prohibitions: whether recognizable or not, whether directed against murder or not, *imiziro* have curiously and paradoxically nothing to do with law. As Kagame says: “They [Rwandan prohibitions] all have this in common: they never concern law. They only fall upon those who are concerned by them. In this way, they enjoin no positive outcome” (Kagame 1956: 383). In other words, an *umuziro* is effectively what cannot enter into any form of economy. Nothing can be gained from adhering to them. If the respect of the sixth commandment guarantees a life free of prison sentences, then the respect of an *umuziro* guarantees nothing. Why? Simply because the respect of the prohibition might have consequences beyond the single life of the one who takes it on. So adhering to a prohibition does not necessarily guarantee a return in this life or another. The “otherworldly” dimensions (past or future) of the *umuziro* indeed also prevent it from being negotiated in the context of a religious structure of belief: the one who follows a prohibition, for example, can never be promised paradise. Unlike the Abrahamic Commandment, there is here therefore no

28 On this, see Balibusta 1985: 152 and 2000a: 100.

29 “Être au Rwanda, c’est éviter ponctuellement ce qui n’est pas permis” (Kagame 1956: 393). Also quoted in Nothomb 1965: 196.

pay off. In this way, an *umiziro* expresses the necessity of rule in a situation in which there are no written laws and therefore no guarantees.

If one then takes on board the temporal dimension of these oral Rwandan prohibitions with their extraordinary reliance on the family, clan, or lineage, and the possible involvement of long-dead ancestors and future offspring, then how is one to make sense again of our old first and sixth commandments and the way they still articulate the absolute responsibility of the individual (sinful) subject? Can one affect the other and if so, how? And ultimately, what can be learned, through this comparison, about the birth of language and that of the law?

Let us first look at the impact of these Rwandan prohibitions on what we have inherited from a Judaeo-Christian context. The force of generality of the biblical commandments, one that inaugurates the sovereignty of both God and human subjectivity and introduces written language as the start of law is here severely shaken at its core, and this for three fundamental reasons. First, the force of generality that imposes itself on the individual sinner suddenly no longer makes sense because the group (family, clan, or lineage) takes over from the individual. This does not lessen the responsibility (and the guilt) of the one committing a crime and thereby transgressing a prohibition. This simply extends across generations the transgression, making it a concern for all living relatives. Second, the sin that is targeted in the sixth commandment is here replaced by accident. To transgress a prohibition is indeed not a criminal offence, but a woeful distortion of the fabric of the social present: the family, clan, or lineage. Again, this does not mean Rwandese are freer than their pious religious counterparts. This simply means that accidents happen, some more unfortunate than others, and no one should shoulder the burden of it on their own. Finally, the economic aspect of the biblical command is here replaced by an intermittent – albeit necessarily nebulous – relationship with ancestors or descendants. This is what the prohibitions ultimately highlight: Rwandese never operate alone; they go through the *imiziro* as part of an a-temporal structure that effectively overrules them.

Obviously, the aim behind the juxtaposition of biblical commandment with Rwandan prohibitions is not to privilege a now often-forgotten oral system over a now sadly often-ignored written biblical text or vice-versa. Rwandese themselves would not want to do so either, not because they are less ruled by animist beliefs or because they are less Christian than they used to be, but because the two take place every day without anyone really noticing which tradition is being followed. A Benedictine nun living in the Monastère Notre-Dame de l'Annonciation Sovu, near Butare, for example, once told me that she rules her life following both the strict edicts of the Bible and occasionally the long-held beliefs and rules of her family and clan. Similarly, an atheist worldly Rwandese living in the pristine capital city of Rwanda might also easily understand the importance of observing certain moral imperatives without necessarily attributing an origin to these in either one or other system of belief; he or she will simply have inherited them as self-evident. In this way, whether inherited from ancestors or the White Fathers, prohibitions “happen”, their force of generality being applicable often irrespective of their written or oral origins. In this way, the laxity in heeding either moral system to “the letter” renders pointless any attempt at distinguishing the two or creating a hierarchy between them.

This juxtaposition aims instead to question what is generally perceived as self-evident: i.e. that the start of ethics can only be found in the intertwining of a generic responsible singular subject and of a written commandment, principle, or maxim that can be read, uttered, and repeated. In other words, looking at Rwandan prohibitions allows us to question the very foundations of ethics in general, their supposed dependence on the written and their reliance on often-forgotten religious commandments. The orality of Rwandan prohibitions, their many contexts, the general un-answerability of the individual, the extension of the problem throughout the family, clan, or lineage, and beyond those, towards what can never be remembered or anticipated, shake the concreteness of Moses' tables and their invitation to deliberation as well as the supposed goodness of always trumping the possibility of murder with an "I am the Lord, thy God". What prohibition is indeed transgressed if it is not just futural, but also multiple and ancestral? Who is really responsible when a crime is committed? Who should endorse the responsibility of a crime if the "I am" is socially set aside? These are questions that neither philosophy nor ethics, understood in a Western context, can possibly answer if they do not take seriously what Rwandan prohibitions with their source in the oral tradition leave us.

This juxtaposition also aims at questioning yet another meta-narrative of Abrahamic origin unnecessarily blanketing the world. Looking at intermittently used oral prohibitions in Rwanda, thinking about the role of ancestors and descendants in the attribution of responsibility or guilt amidst a family, clan, or lineage, and considering what does not belong to the social present when a prohibition enters into force, allow us to question the supposed universality of a fundamentally problematic – if not dangerous – monotheistic system that privileges criminal individuals, their necessary guilt, and inevitably, their eventual redemption in a penitentiary system provided by the community or in a world beyond. The juxtaposition thus forces a different kind of reflection that focuses on the origin of ethics: not where does ethics come from or how it comes to us, but who actually utters moral imperatives and who is ready to hear them? This simple shift from "where" to "who" that only an oral tradition can provoke shows that ethics effectively cannot exclusively originate in a written law and it cannot concern the individual as if a sovereign subject; it concerns the social present, as it occurs amongst groups of people and those who are no longer there or are yet to come. It is amongst them that ethical commandments and moral imperatives are provoked into being or made to "happen", something which is difficult to reconcile with the economies provided in writing by monotheistic religions and their secular avatars.

Finally, by juxtaposing the first and sixth commandments with Rwandan Prohibitions, the aim is also finally to make sense of the conundrum left behind by the Rwandan genocide: who is indeed responsible in a situation in which there is no single individual ultimately responsible for the crimes committed (a Hitler or a Stalin, for example), but a whole nation committing, voluntarily or not, acts of genocide? This is probably the most difficult and problematic aspect of the Rwandan genocide: it knows no designated culprit; it identifies no single sinner; it recognizes no "evil" person. This is especially the case now that the distinction Hutus/Tutsi is forbidden and a new unifying ahistorical citizenship homogenizes the population under one name: the Rwandese, not as a

family, clan, or lineage, but as a uniform appellation (“I am Rwandese...”) belonging at once to no one and everyone. Cast in such a generic mould, the fault, guilt, and responsibility for the genocide is thus inevitably transposed onto the “other” and especially the foreigner for having imposed the ethnic distinction in the first place (Belgian ethnographers), for intervening at the last minute disastrously (operation *Turquoise*), and for refusing to help (Clinton and the UN) during one of the most terrifying moments in the history of humanity. Notwithstanding this unresolvable conundrum, we therefore have much to learn from the old Rwandan prohibitions. They invite us to think ethics beyond the burdensome confines of the birth of subjectivity, language, and the monotheism of “I am the Lord, thy God”.

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