CHAPTER 1

Double Binds: Ethics after Auschwitz

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How is it possible to speak, when you feel . . . a strange double bind: an infinite claim to speak, a duty to speak infinitely, imposing itself with irrepressible force, and at the same time, an almost physical impossibility to speak, a choking feeling.

Sarah Kofman, Smothered Words

The Holocaust signifies an immense human failure. It did enormous harm to ethics by showing how ethical teachings could be overridden or even subverted to serve the interests of genocide. To the extent that philosophers—moral philosophers in particular—have paid close attention to the Holocaust (not many, unfortunately, have done so), a significant version of the double bind that Sarah Kofman (1934–1994) identified in Smothered Words is definitely in effect. One feels a duty to speak, an obligation to make ethics stronger and less subject to overriding or subversion, an insistence not only to drive home the difference between right and wrong but also to influence action accordingly. Yet such work can produce a choking feeling, a sense that too much harm has been done for a good recovery to be made, a suspicion that ethics may be overwhelmed by the challenges it faces. The bind is double, for the sense of ethical responsibility, real though it is, remains hopelessly optimistic and naïve unless it grapples with the despair that encounters with the Holocaust are bound to produce. To be touched by that despair, however, scarcely encourages one to believe that ethical responsibilities will be sufficiently accepted and met. Caught between the post-Holocaust need to

J. L. Geddes et al. (eds.), The Double Binds of Ethics after the Holocaust
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speak for ethics and above all to speak ethically and boldly, on the one hand, and the feeling that the key elements of ethics—words, arguments, appeals to reason, persuasion through the example of moral action—may be inadequate, on the other, the question persists: What can and should be made of ethics after Auschwitz?

It is doubtful that such a question can be answered, at least if one expects answers to bring finality and closure. But there can be responses, and that is what this chapter attempts to provide, albeit only in part and even in fragmented form. The attempt consists of two parts: (1) consideration of some of Sarah Kofman’s contributions to post-Holocaust ethics, and (2) reflections stimulated by her contributions, which point toward what she called “the possibility of a new ethics.” The two parts of my attempt contend that post-Holocaust ethics must take seriously the fragility of ethics and the awareness that nothing good should be taken for granted.

Knotted Words

What can words say? What can they do? Words can be put to many uses. They can make statements and ask questions. They can mystify and deconstruct; they can be used against themselves. Speeches, propaganda, orders, laws—these are only a few of the ways in which language can advance mass murder. Testimonies, memoirs, poems, stories—these are only a few of the ways in which language can bear witness to atrocity. Words can kill. They are also memory’s voice. Without words, there could not have been the Holocaust. Words, however, cannot do everything. One reason is that words can be smothered or, as Sarah Kofman sometimes said, words can be knotted. The Holocaust produced knotted words, especially for the survivors, for such words, Kofman suggests, are “demanded and yet forbidden, because for too long they have been internalized and withheld.” Knotted words, she went on to say, “stick in your throat and cause you to suffocate, to lose your breath”; they “asphyxiate you, taking away the possibility of even beginning.”

Kofman understood all too well what she was saying, for this French philosopher was a Holocaust survivor. Like some other important writers who also endured that catastrophe—Jean Améry (1912–1978), Tadeusz Borowski (1922–1951), Paul Celan (1920–1970), and perhaps Primo Levi (1919–1987)—she took her own