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**COMMENTARY ON:**

**Beyond 'Good' and 'Evil': Breaking Down Binary Oppositions in Holocaust  
Representations of 'Privileged' Jews**

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The paper written by Adam Brown offers a new and close reading of a seminal text in the field of Holocaust literature: *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi. It is the more so interesting as the chapter on the “Grey zone” in the book is among the most quoted chapters on this field, used by scholars studying all issues of Holocaust representations, Holocaust writing, Holocaust ethics, Holocaust cultural studies and even Holocaust theology. This topic of the Sonderkommandos is what I call a “floating one”. It should be central in the history of the Holocaust – weren’t those Jews working on the very site of the mass destruction, in the crematoriums of Birkenau, and hasn’t Auschwitz become the central “site of memory” of the Holocaust? But one hardly reads the scrolls buried by these men and the difficulty to find published versions of them is to my view a sign of the unbearable question they raise. It has been then much too easy to hide behind a few sentences of Primo Levi, most of the time taken out of their context, and the very concept of “grey zone” is commonly used to describe many events on the Holocaust, supposed to be liminal. The paradox that arises from Brown’s paper is that Levi, being seen as THE moralist of the Holocaust, called to suspend judgements on the Sonderkommandos when at the same time most commentators of Levi’s text can’t avoid passing judgements, whether in throwing the Sonderkommandos into the category of perpetrators, or in whitewashing them, labelling them only as victims. Those interpretations of Levi’s text betray the very complexity of it: when Levi says that one should suspend one’s judgement, it does not say that judgement is impossible.

Another difficulty in reading the text is that Levi describes a supreme moral ambiguity while at the same time saying that separation between victims and perpetrators should be maintained at all costs. The paper discussed here shows that when categories of judgement should be suspended in dealing with such extreme cases of the Holocaust, one cannot avoid using them. It could be understood that the destruction of 6 million Jews in Europe should have given way to new moral categories but it is not the case, to the contrary. Primo Levi understood clearly that, though claims were made that the idea of humanity had been challenged by what happened in the death camps, human beings living after the Holocaust, whether witnesses, survivors or philosophers, had no way to rise to the level necessary to rethink moral issues. And even more, the mind seems “frozen” when trying to approach the Sonderkommandos. Thus the supreme effort made by Levi and the fascination provoked by his writing.

Brown’s paper used categories of moral philosophy, in a very clear way, and also shows a precise knowledge and understanding of the Levi’s commentators themselves: texts that are almost as widely used and confronted as Levi’s one. One could have added the book by Todorov (which is in the bibliography): Todorov sees the moral categories in the camp in a more diverse way, differentiating between the level of conscience granted by a relatively less terrible physical conditions of inmates, compared to the “Musulmänner”, the prisoners about to die, the drowned of Primo Levi’s book.

To conclude, it is even more interesting, maybe even imperative, to let historians have the last word, when moralists find it difficult to come to a definitive conclusion. Brown defines a “Paradoxical Bind” that could be read as a call for more historical research, in order to better describe the infinite diversity of experience in the camp. The “historical paradox” may be then enounced, in the fact that this call will always be made impossible by the scarcity of sources. But Auschwitz soil contains more than ashes: one can imagine that other scrolls may emerge from it.