

Reflections on Evil

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The world in which we dwell confronts us daily with evil: with poverty and misery, with illness, misfortune, war, crime, hatred, envy, pain and death. And we do not only encounter the Evil that hits us only personally. Even if we live in relative happiness, enjoy a certain wealth and the blessings of a perhaps ephemeral health, we are surrounded by the evil and misfortune of others. Usually, our day begins with news of disasters, wars and deaths, and ends with reports about the mischief of various public persons.

In this turmoil of evil, the rare moments of happiness, health, peace and wealth resemble atolls spread in a stormy ocean—tiny, shaky islets that barely rise above the waters, always in danger of being swallowed by the raging waves, or by the rising level of the waters.

Nevertheless, we never give up! We wake up day after day, we rise from bed, we perform with more or less care the daily rituals of our morning ablutions and leave our houses to face a world that seemingly does us the favour of tolerating our existence—and this only as long as we do not become too annoying. What keeps us upright and gives us the power to continue our life paths in this hostile world? The hope for something better?

Some people claim that hope is in fact our sole motive. However, if we want to be frank with ourselves, we have to admit that we become aware of the powers of hope only in those rare moments in which we have both the opportunity and the mental strength to contemplate our lives in their totality, achieving this peculiar synthesis of our past with our present and our future. More often than not, however, what keeps us at the frontline of life and preserves us from falling into the abyss of depression is the thought that everything could have been worse. It is the feeling that until now we have fared quite well, that we have avoided disaster, at least for today and tomorrow and perhaps also for the foreseeable future. This feeling of relief may not be stronger, but it overcomes us more often than the feeling of hope.

I do not claim that we live in a world that excludes any hope—the opposite holds. I claim, however, that for most of the time we are not aware of our hope, but of our luck in having succeeded in avoiding the worst. And at a closer consideration, the awareness of our luck in having succeeded in avoiding the worst is the soil in which hope can take root and bloom.

On the basis of this reality, we can formulate the hypothesis that the world is neither indifferent nor fundamentally hostile to us, but that it rather accepts and supports us in a way that at first glance seems to be strange, irrational and cynical. The world supports us in a way that does not show us what there is to gain, but what we have not yet lost. In other words, the world does not present to us its absolute perfection, but it gives us to understand that we have to take it as it is because it is the best that can happen to us. As some people say, the world in which we live is the best of all possible worlds.

We live in the best of all possible worlds. It is the best of all possible worlds for each one of us and for the collectives to which we belong. We live in the best of all possible worlds every moment of our individual and of our historical existence—from our first to our last breath. The world was the best of all possible worlds for the Trojans who saw their hometown becoming the prey of Agamemnon's thirst for power and of the rogue arrogance of the Achaeans, for the victors of the battle of Austerlitz, for the conquerors of St. Petersburg's winter palace, and it is also the best of all possible worlds—even if this will sound cynical—for the innocent victims of a bombing assault on the frequented square of a modern capital. I emphasize: Our world is not perfect. On the contrary, it is full of imperfections, physical and ethical. Despite these imperfections, it is the best place to live compared with every other world that one could imagine.

Obviously, this assertion cannot be proven experimentally or by empirical observation. We cannot create an alternate world, nor can we transfer ourselves to a parallel universe, in which history has taken a different course, a universe in which all known and unknown famines, earthquakes, wars and crimes never happened, to study how its denizens fare and to compare their fates with ours. On the other hand, we can imagine a world in which the known history is 'rewritten', omitting, however, a single evil event, e.g. a war, a crime or a disaster. Let us then assume that some succeeded in rewriting history in this manner, exempting themselves from a given evil and letting everything else happen as it happened. This would be a world with the least possible deviation from our world. In this world, certain persons would have avoided their personal evil fates, while the rest of humanity would have experienced them as they did in our world. If such a 'correction' were possible, it would constitute a blatant injustice, because there is no reason that justifies the privileged treatment of the group of people that have been spared their evil fates from the rest of humanity. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that our world is unjust, this minimally deviating world would be more unjust than ours, even if it contained less pain and death, because the increase in happiness of those few would have been gained at the expense of everyone else.

Let us now assume that for the sake of justice we construct a world in which every evil event known to us has been removed, but that it contains all other good events, how few they might have been. Such a world cannot exist, however, because good and evil events are not separate and self-sufficient entities, but rather form a continuous chain. A good event always presupposes an evil one, in the sense that a good event always rescinds the effects of an evil one. Thus, a world in which no evil would have happened ever, would be a world in which nothing would have happened ever. And if we will also in future avoid any evil, it is also a world in which nothing will ever happen. A world in which nothing ever happened, nothing happens and nothing will ever happen is a world void of any reality, a world that does not exist.¹

¹ Alternatively, if we accept the possibility that all evil events could be removed from history, then the remaining good events could form a series according to their 'quality' of goodness. In such a series, the lesser good event would be worse than the succeeding better event, and its existence would thus constitute an evil, even if this evil would be a relative one. So, to achieve a world with no evil

The conclusion of these brief reflections is then that the world in which we live is the best, the most just, the most perfect of all possible, i.e. imaginable, worlds. And this conclusion is valid regardless of the belief that the world is either the result of a divine act of creation or the effect of the activity of 'blind' natural forces.

The world in which we live is then an alloy of good and evil and we are capable of recognizing, characterizing, fighting and vanquishing this evil, if not permanently then at least temporarily. As self-conscious beings we have knowledge not only of the evil, but also of the good, as well as of the fact that we can fight the evil and sometimes also beat it. On this knowledge relies not only the hope that the atolls of good will not sink in the ocean of evil, but also the hope that their size and strength will continuously increase, and that someday they will merge into a mighty continent.

We live in the best of all possible worlds. We live in a world where light overcomes darkness, because the darkness is only the absence of light. This was the prevailing theory of evil in post enlightenment moral philosophy. This theory received, however, a fatal blow from the Holocaust, the Shoah, during which between 1941 and 1945 at least six million Jewish and some hundred thousand persons of various other nationalities were murdered, among them also Germans, whom the Nazi regime regarded as unworthy of living, or sentenced to death for political reasons.

The historical experience of the Holocaust was the clearest proof that in our world not only the darkness exists, i.e. the evil that is characterized by the absence of good, of knowledge, of law and order, but that there is also an evil that appears as light, as a dark, blinding light. We live in a world where the evil exists also in a cultivated, educated, positive form, in a form that reveals a path, that issues laws and creates an order—a law and an order, however, that lead to the abyss. We live in a world in which the evil acts and participates actively in shaping it, sometimes leaving behind indelible marks and monuments chiselled in stone and cast in bronze. Is it then still true that we live in the best of all possible worlds?

To answer this question under these new circumstances, we have first to examine the nature of this second kind of evil. The evil we were concerned with so far was the evil that is due either to ignorance, or to acrary, i.e. due to our inability to restrain our passions and our desires. The evil that confronts us now is, however, an evil that appears in a positive guise: An active evil, a planning and executing evil, a rationally judging evil, an evil that sets aims, uses methods and achieves results, an evil that wants to create and to leave its marks in its creations, an evil that consists of flesh and blood, an evil incarnate.

The characteristic feature of evil incarnate is its *self-perfection*, a trait that must not be confused with self-sufficiency. A self-sufficient person is a person who is able to organize their life without necessarily depending on certain persons or on

at all, all 'lesser good' events than the best event should be removed. This world would consist at the end of only one event, which is equal to the fact that in it nothing would happen. And because this single event would not allow beside it any other event, better or worse, then we could regard it also as an evil and remove it, rendering this world void of any reality.

special conditions. Self-sufficiency is nevertheless a relative state that always strives for ideal perfection, without achieving it totally. In contrast to self-sufficiency, which characterizes the ontic state of a person, self-perfection characterizes a mental state of a person, namely their self-regard as actually and absolutely perfect in every relevant aspect. In other words, a self-perfect person regards herself as existing in a level of absolute perfection that common persons cannot achieve regardless of their efforts. This means that the self-perfect person regards their perfection as totally independent from any factor external to her. A self-perfect person regards themselves as perfect by their very nature.

Our everyday language does not provide a special term that accurately describes this situation, therefore the necessity of introducing the neologism 'self-perfect'. It contains instead many terms that describe emotional states and character types that are manifestations of self-perfection: arrogance, narcissism, hubris, self-conceit, presumptuousness. The reason why I do not use any of these terms is that a 'refined' self-perfect person can effectively conceal the behaviours that are described by these terms. The sophisticated self-perfect person can appear as self-collected— sometimes even at the verge of being ascetic—as moderate, humble and reasonable.

Why then is the self-perfect person the incarnation of evil? How is it possible that a person is able to cause evil only because they think that they are a source of positivity, a judgment that results from their self-regard as self-perfect? In other words, how is it possible that evil deeds are perpetrated in the name of goodness?

The reason lies in the fact that perfection, as with every positive attribute,² cannot be created from nothing, nor can it be annihilated. The real experience, that the perfection of the world is increasing slowly and continuously, does not count as counterevidence, because perfection has two aspects, a potential and an actual, a perceptible one. The degree of actual perfection of a living being is finite and can increase only by making use of the actual perfection of another being by consuming it, as for example is the case of the assimilation of food, or by converting a part of its own potential perfection into actual, as for example is the case when one becomes more perfect by exercising a competence, i.e. by improving a virtue. Both ways of increasing actual perfection rely, however, on the interaction of the being with its physical environment and with other beings, and both have as consequence that beings that are members of the same species possess the same degree of actual perfection with respect to their common nature. This means that a human being, a person, cannot increase their actual perfection by consuming the actual perfection of another person, e.g. by murdering her. The opposite takes place, because the active and deliberate annihilation of a human being by another human being results in the total 'reconversion' of the actual perfection of the victim into potential. So, the only gain in perfection a murderer can have is perhaps the appropriation of the potential perfection of their victim. This can be, as we have seen, converted into actual perfection only by exercising a competence, i.e. by improving a virtue. Because, however, murder is by definition not virtuous, this

² An analogous positive magnitude from the realm of physics that cannot be created from nothing nor annihilated is *energy*.

gain in potential perfection cannot be converted into actual perfection, unless the murderer confesses their crime, which would result in punishment and hence in a decrease of their actual perfection.³

A self-perfect person does not make the error of trying to increase their actual perfection by consuming actively the actual perfection of another fellow human being. The self-perfect person is not the result of a murder. The error of the self-perfect person lies in their conviction that they exist by virtue of their nature at a higher level of actual perfection compared with a 'common' human being, whom they regard as naturally inferior—as a 'subhuman', an *Untermensch*. The naturally inferior human being, the *Untermensch*, is the necessary consequence of the self-perfect person's error, because the fictitious superiority of the self-perfect can only exist by 'conceptually diminishing' the actual perfection of a fellow human being, debasing them to a subhuman.

The ways and arguments a self-perfect person use for justifying this debasing vary according to the historical and cultural circumstances. Their most common real causes, however, are individual or collective experiences of the loss of social, political, economic or cultural status, experiences that constitute what Simone Weil described as 'uprooting'.⁴ The self-perfect person is an uprooted person that tries to heal the wounds of their uprooting with the fictitious idea of their 'fundamental' self-perfection. In trying to do so, they uproot other human beings, removing from them a part of their natural actual perfection.

Thus, the self-perfect person commits two errors: First, they fail to recognize the true causes of their uprooting, and second, they try to compensate their loss by virtually removing perfection from a fellow human, rendering them subhuman. The distorted relationship between the self-perfect and their antipode, the subhuman, cannot be restored by the perfection of the latter and their equalization with the self-perfect because the distortion is part of the nature of the self-perfect. So, the only 'practical' solution is the physical extermination of the subhuman.

The self-perfect person treats their antipode in the same manner a physician treats disease. The Holocaust, the Shoah, is in historical terms the most massive and systematic effort of the self-perfect man to relieve himself of his own conceptual creation, the *Untermensch*. The Shoah was planned and executed rationally and in cold blood, within a legal framework, disciplined and with precision, without any passion, and suppressing feelings of compassion and pity that overcame many of the executors, according to their own testimonies.

³ Suppose, for example, that a usurper murders the legitimate king and seizes the kingdom because of his thirst for power. With this act he becomes a potentially good king. To become an actually good king he should, however, rule as a virtuous king, which would entail that he should be just. If he is just, he must confess that he murdered the legitimate king to seize the kingdom because of his thirst for power. This confession would result in his abdication and his submission to punishment. So at the end he would not increase his actual perfection, but would rather forfeit at least a part of it.

⁴ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots, Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, Routledge 2001.

As every effort that is based on unreal grounds, the efforts of the self-perfect man to get rid of the existence of his antipode turn at the end against him. This is so not only because the effort to annihilate innocent, arbitrarily debased, human beings evokes a general reaction, a reaction that in the case of Nazism took the form of the raising of a multinational army against it (therefore the Second World War was a real 'world war' compared with the First World War, which in principle was only a conflict among dying colonial empires), but also because the self-perfect man realises at the end that the elimination of the subhuman does not only not relieve him from, but it rather intensifies, his pain, because the additional perfection of the self-perfect does not stem from himself, but relies always on the fiction of the imperfection of others. Without being concerned any more with the elimination of his antipode, the self-perfect man realises that also his own existence cannot stand up to the fictitious standards of perfection that he arbitrarily set up, and so he turns finally against himself.

At the end, the self-perfect man, the evil incarnate, destroys himself. Before he arrives at this point, however, he has brought disaster. He has inflicted wounds that are very difficult to heal, if they can be healed ever. And, he has sown the seed of the next self-perfect man, who will appear with a different face and a different concept of self-perfection: a concept that at the beginning will be very difficult to recognize and will perhaps demand an even more painful and engaged effort to combat.

We live in a world that experiences evil not only as privation, but also as position. We live in a world that allows evil to incarnate itself and to act. However, evil cannot incarnate itself as an autonomous substance but depends always on the aid of a human being that 'lends' to it his reality. The price of this loan is self-destruction. In this regard, we live in a world that is by any means better than a world in which evil could sustain itself autonomously and independently. We live in a world in which evil exists only as a fallen angel, as Lucifer (who also has committed the error of regarding himself as self-perfect), and not as Ahriman, as a naturally evil spirit, or as Empedoclean νεῖκος (hatred) involved in an eternal fight with φιλότης, the goodness.

We live, however, in a world, the powers of which are apparently not sufficient to prevent the incarnation of evil. Do we then really live in the best of all possible worlds?

From the beginning of human history, man always tried and still tries to redeem himself from evil, both from the evil that is an outflow of privation and ignorance, as well as from the evil incarnate. He fought and still fights against ignorance and privation by means of scientific knowledge and enlightenment, and against the evil incarnate by moral education and by implementing justice. But also, from the beginning of human history, man has realised that these efforts cannot succeed without 'external' help, without divine interference or good luck, or both. That this intuition is not merely a form of superstition, but a necessity is testified by at least two philosophical approaches:

- a. In his poem 'On Nature' Parmenides⁵ is roaming on his chariot on the pathways of erroneous knowledge, until the nymphs bring him to the palace of the goddess and convince her to grant him entrance. Only after that does the goddess reveal to Parmenides the nature of absolutely true knowledge and the method he has to follow to achieve it. Without this help, without this divine revelation, the path leading to true knowledge would not only be impassable but would also remain unknown. This path was, however, not revealed to Parmenides because of a whim, but only after he tried hard to seek and find the truth. The fact that Parmenides was led by the nymphs to the goddess and that they were convinced to let him enter and to reveal the truth to him were both necessary consequences of his will and determination. The revelation of the truth is thus neither a mere reward, nor the result of an arbitrary divine decision: It is an act, which about five centuries after Parmenides a more abstract, but also more man-focussed understanding of divinity will characterize as an act of 'divine grace'.
- b. Some four generations after Parmenides, Aristotle admits in his 'Nicomachean Ethics'⁶ that happiness (εὐδαιμονία) cannot be achieved directly, but that it is rather an 'oblique' end. According to him, life experience shows us that we have to be very careful when we attribute happiness to a person. It is possible that someone has lived a virtuous life, that he has made only the right decisions, that he has been successful, that he has a good reputation among his fellow citizens, that he has excelled in public life, that he has been awarded the highest honours during his life, or even *post mortem*. The philosopher warns us, however, that our judgment that this person has achieved happiness is not necessarily correct, because, for example, their children and grandchildren may spoil their honour and mindlessly spend the fortune they have accumulated. It can also turn out that a decision by them that was regarded as wise at the time it was made was in the long term pernicious. It cannot thus be completely avoided that today's good is tomorrow's evil.

Aristotle stresses further that happiness is not just the attribute of a concrete situation or a concrete life conduct. The relations with their particular social environment and with humankind in general are both pivotal factors in the determination of a person's happiness. Thus, happiness is not an end that can be achieved directly, i.e. by the successful effort of a particular person, or of a particular community, but only with the contribution of factors that cannot be controlled by this particular person, or community. In other words, happiness can be achieved only indirectly. The obliqueness of happiness as an end is, according to Aristotle, neither a reason for despair, nor a reason to think that one should seek only actual pleasure. This is so because every action is performed with regard to its end and to the capabilities of the agent, and not with regard to what can actually occur, either by accident, or because the agent is not omniscient. It is true that we always decide informed by what appears to us to be good at a given moment, keeping,

⁵ Parmenides, *On Nature* – proem.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b1-1098b1.

however, always also in mind that our decision has to survive future questioning and criticism, and that we always try to broaden our knowledge to be able to avoid as many evils as possible, hoping that in the long term our decisions will have more positive and less negative consequences. Thus, like Parmenides, who acknowledges that we cannot find the truth without divine aid, also Aristotle acknowledges that we cannot achieve absolute moral perfection relying only on our capacities, but we need also the aid of a kind of 'good chance', which is not purely accidental and arbitrary, but relies on the fact that there is a cosmic order determined by a divine mind.

The central message of monotheistic Christianity, which is based both on the Parmenidean (mediated by Plato) and the Aristotelian philosophies, is that man's self-redemption from evil is not only impossible, but that already its attempt is the first step that leads to the incarnation of evil. The redemption from evil is the result of the 'co-operation' of human effort and divine grace, the latter being not a mere reward for obedience to the divine commandments, but a (logically) necessary consequence of the sincere effort. Of an effort that is grounded in the hope that the evil we encounter in the world belongs to the reality of its appearance and not to its very nature. In other words, our effort to resist and to combat evil is grounded in the hope that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

In what consists our contribution to our redemption from evil? Obviously, it does not consist in the blind and uncritical application of divine laws that command certain things and forbid others. Such laws do not exist, and if they exist then they are not divine laws—this is one of Jesus' main messages. The divine law is only a constitutive law, i.e. it defines a very general form of life. Like every other constitutive law, the divine law does not forbid anything and does not decree punishments, but it is rather an orientation aid. Therefore, it is simple and positive. It is simple, but it comes in a variety of equivalent formulations, like 'love thy neighbour as thyself', or 'love each other' (John 13:34). In other words, hurt no one (*neminem laedere*), help the fellow human person to stand on their own feet, give them support in their own struggle. And first of all, be lenient with them. Be always forgiving. You shall acknowledge that he errs as you err and therefore do not consider yourself as more perfect than them. This admonition, this 'commandment' does not prohibit us from defending ourselves against evil and to combat it with all the means we possess. It reminds us, however, that the enemy is evil and not the human person that has been caught in its nets.

Let us summarize:

We live in a world that on the one hand allows the manifestation and incarnation of evil, but on the other hand shows us the path that we have to follow to combat it.

We live in a world that supports us, when our powers are not sufficient to discern the right path, by lighting up a beacon, by revealing us the truth, by giving us strength and hope.

We live in a world that encourages us to be good, even against evil.

We live in a world that allows us to try to become more perfect and rewards our efforts by revealing to us its secrets and letting us render it more hospitable to life.

We live in a world that allows us to forgive and to regret, achieving thus, supported by divine grace, redemption from evil.

And, above all, we live in a world that gives us the chance to regard and to experience it, to feel pleasure and pain, to create, to gather knowledge, to become wiser, to receive and to give love. We live in the best of all possible worlds.