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Back to Ancient Questions?
Tornare alle domande degli Antichi?

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Back to Ancient Questions?

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An Antidote to Banal Society

Maria Benedetta Saponaro

A sense of morality is notionally present in every man, even if it seems to hibernate in all of them.

(V. Jankelevitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 1981)

1. *Eichmann and Socrates: two paradigmatic experiences*

The trial of Eichmann posed several questions for Hannah Arendt.

Is evildoing, not just the sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the absence of not merely “base motives” (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all, any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being “determined to prove a villain”, *not* a necessary condition for evildoing? Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought? Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide? The question that imposed itself was, could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it “conditions” men against evildoing?¹

The man sitting opposite her was not an evil man, even if his actions were wicked. He had not acted out of hatred or revenge, nor due to jealousy or weakness; «the deeds were monstrous, but the doer – at least the very effective one now on trial – was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was

¹ H. Arendt, *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, in G. Kohn (ed.), *Responsibility and Judgment*, Schocken Books, New York 2003, p. 160.

something entirely negative: it was non stupidity but *thoughtlessness*»².

Eichmann became «the mirror of a widespread ethical torpor, afflicted by an extraordinary incapacity to think and thus to judge»³. Moreover, «the few rules and standards according to which men used to tell right from wrong, and which were invoked to judge or justify others and themselves, and whose validity were supposed to be self-evident to every sane person either as a part of divine or of natural law» were ignored “from daylight to night-time”⁴. These rules were ignored not so much because Nazi criminals refused to apply them as much as the effect of the behaviour of ordinary people «who, as long as moral standards were socially accepted, never dreamt of doubting what they had been taught to believe in»⁵ abandoning such standards the same way one would a suit rather than abandoning one’s self. Hannah Arendt, without the presumption of coining a theory, considered «the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could be not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness»⁶, an expression which in itself defined the banality of evil: immoral acts committed by sane men who lacked personality and shared an incapacity to think. Extreme evil, the evil inherent in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, could never have been carried out without the collaboration of minor or, to quote Simona Forti⁷, “mediocre” demons such as Eichmann.

Extreme evil and banal evil are the two poles of an action: extreme evil focuses on the subject or object that is subjected to the action (the superfluous man) and on features of the action itself (inhumanity), banal evil refers to who carries out the action (the thoughtless man).

Arendt began to ask questions about the activity of thought at the time she was writing her *Vita Activa*. She was not convinced that thinking was aimed towards contemplation and that it therefore constituted passiveness,

² H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego-New York 1971, p. 4.

³ A. Cavarero, *Il Socrate di Hannah Arendt*, in I. Possenti (ed.), *Socrate*, Cortina, Milano 2015, p. 84. For an alternative interpretation on Eichmann, see D. Cesarini, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*, Heinemann, London 2004; B. Stangneth, *Eichmann before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, Hardcover, New York 2014.

⁴ H. Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, in G. Kohn (ed.), *Responsibility and Judgment*, cit., p. 50.

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 54.

⁶ H. Arendt, *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, cit., p. 159.

⁷ S. Forti, *I nuovi demoni. Ripensare oggi male e potere*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2012.

as asserted in centuries-old wisdom. On the other hand, she was convinced by Cato's argument that «never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself» (*Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset*)⁸.

In order to demonstrate the consequences of thought, Arendt was to rely on the field of experience.

The master of the active nature of thought was Socrates, «an example of a thinker who was not a professional, who in his person unified two apparently contradictory passions, for thinking and acting – not in the sense of being eager to apply his thoughts or to establish theoretical standards for action but in the much more relevant sense of being equally at home in both spheres and able to move from one sphere to the other with the greatest apparent ease, very much as we ourselves constantly move back and forth between experiences in the world of appearances and the need for reflecting on them»⁹. Gadfly-like, Socrates continually stirred the natural inclination of thought among his citizens, debating *doxa* (common opinions); like a midwife, sterile of knowledge, he tested them and aided the birth of thought to seek the truth in *doxa*; like an electric ray, he paralysed his interlocutors at the first sign of doubt: the hermeneutics of Socratic dialogue.

The wind of thought – «wind in itself is invisible, however, what it does is obvious and in a certain way we can perceive its arrival»¹⁰ – sweeps away established truth and the illustrative criteria needed to react; it paralyses, confuses, it mankind ready humanity to search for sense without any form of protection.

The oracle of Apollo on Delphi defined Socrates as “the wisest of all mortals” – he who understands he does not know is wise – and appears to represent the condition of possibility in Socratic dialogue. A man's understanding of the limits of knowability for topics which can not be expressed in terms of certainty or proof allows him to overcome them through the search for sense. Arendt herself concurs when commenting on the Kantian difference between reason and intellect; «*The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same*»¹¹. The wise man, therefore, is he who does not limit

⁸ M.T. Cicerone, *De Republica*, I, 17. Cfr. H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, cit., pp. 7-8.

⁹ H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, cit., p. 167.

¹⁰ Senofonte, *Memorabilia*, IV, iii, 14.

¹¹ H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, cit., p. 15. Arendt disputes Kant: if on the one hand he

knowledge to what can be expressed in terms of certainty and proof, but one who seeks sense.

It is from the actual experience of not-knowing, in which one of the basic aspects of the human condition on earth reveals itself, that the ultimate questions arise – not from the rationalized, demonstrable fact that there are things man does not know, which believers in progress hope to see fully amended one day, or which positivists may discard as irrelevant. In asking the ultimate, unanswerable questions, man establishes himself as a question-asking being¹².

The process of examining and re-examining «all accepted doctrines and rules, can at any moment turn against itself, produce a reversal of the old values, and declare these contraries to be “new values”»¹³ in a form of nihilistic deviation whereby an axiological system is replaced by its own negation, establishing a new, unreflective approach. Nihilism is to be avoided; for Arendt it was nothing but the flipside of conventionality, a circularity of a thought resulting in its having to constantly start again from the beginning.

Arendt refused to undertake the challenge of offering a definitive framework for good and evil, to concentrate on the construction of a moral doctrine. On a question regarding the possible interconnectedness of “non-thought” and “evil”, her answer was consistent with her Socratic interpretation of philosophy; «If there is anything in thinking that can prevent men from doing evil, it must be some property inherent in the activity itself, regardless of its objects»¹⁴.

Nevertheless, discussing the answer to this question, two positive Socratic opinions emerge which we may consider moral precepts without doubt, even if Arendt herself excluded any notion of moral reflection. She argued (somewhat unconvincingly, in my opinion) that these were statements based purely on experience. The first is: «It is better to be wronged

emancipated reason, justifying the need to think beyond the limits of knowability (the final questions), on the other «he remained unaware of the fact that man’s need to reflect encompasses nearly everything that happens to him, things he knows as well as things he can never know» (*ivi*, p. 14). The activity of thought, not attributable to the criteria of certainty and proof which are typical of cognitive activity, was relegated to a marginal role. Moreover, it can be added that thought always concerns absent topics which are unperceived by our senses. According to Arendt, this would explain why «the quest for meaning – rather than the scientist’s thirst for knowledge for its own sake – can be felt to be “unnatural”, as though men, when they begin to think, engage in some activity contrary to the human condition» (H. Arendt, *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, cit., p. 165).

¹² H. Arendt, *Socrates*, in J. Kohn (ed.), *The Promise of Politics*, Schocken Books, New York 2005, p. 34.

¹³ H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, cit., p. 176.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 130.

than to do wrong»¹⁵. The second is «It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me»¹⁶. These two statements should be read together and assume the Delphic “know thyself” maxim, which in the Socratic vision meant «only through knowing what appears to me – only to me, and therefore remaining forever related to my own concrete existence – can I ever understand truth. Absolute truth, which would be the same for all men and therefore unrelated, independent of each man’s existence, cannot exist for mortals. For mortals the important thing is to make *doxa* truthful, to see in every *doxa* truth and to speak in such a way that the truth of one’s opinion reveals itself to oneself and to others»¹⁷. The second statement underlines the relationship which man maintains with himself. In relating to himself, man always becomes two-in-one.

Everything that exists among a plurality of things is not simply what it is, in its identity, but it is also different from other things; this being different belongs to its very nature. When we try to get hold of it in thought, wanting to define it, we must take this otherness (*alteritas*) or difference into account. [...] But this is not at all the case if I in my identity (“being one”) relate to myself. This curious thing that I am needs no plurality in order to establish difference; it carries the difference within itself when it says: “I am I”. So long as I am conscious, that is, conscious of myself, I am identical with myself only for others to whom I appear as one and the same. For myself, articulating this being-conscious-of-my-self, I am inevitably *two-in-one* – which incidentally is the reason why the fashionable search for identity is futile and our modern identity crisis could be resolved only by losing consciousness¹⁸.

¹⁵ Plato, *Gorgia*, 474b.

¹⁶ Plato, *Gorgia*, 482c.

¹⁷ H. Arendt, *Socrates*, cit., p. 19.

¹⁸ H. Arendt, *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, cit., p. 184. «Conscience in all languages means originally not a faculty of knowing and judging right and wrong but what we now call consciousness, that is, the faculty by which we know, are aware of, ourselves» (H. Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 76). About this issue and Arendt’s moral reflection: L. May, *On conscience*, in «American Philosophical Quarterly», 20, 1 (1983), pp. 57-68; M. Ojangan-gas, *Arendt, Socrates, and the Ethics of Conscience*, in «COLLeGIUM», 8 (2010), pp. 67-85. It is worthy to note that Arendt discusses the political relevance of “interior dialogue” as well mentioning *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1989. For Arendt’s political philosophy: M. McCarthy, *Hannah Arendt and Politics*, in «Partisan Review», 51, 4 (1985), 52, 1, pp. 729-738; M. McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt*, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2012; G. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, Rowman & Allanheld, Totowa (N.J.) 1983; L. May, J. Kohn (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, The Mit Press, Cambridge 1996; C. Vallée, *Hannah Arendt: Socrate et la question du totalitarisme*, Ellipses, Paris 1999; D. Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001.

The principle of non-contradiction applies to logic, as it does to ethics (consistency with oneself). In Arendt's opinion, with Socrates consciousness is awareness in itself.

Those who resisted committing evil acts, the anti-Eichmanns who appear throughout the history of the Holocaust like silent souls, did not "miss an appointment with themselves". They preferred to perish rather than kill, because if they had done so they would have contradicted themselves, the selves they were aware of. Those who did not collaborate or refused any compromise with the system

were the only ones who dared judge by themselves, and they were capable of doing so not because they disposed of a better system of values or because the old standards of right and wrong were still firmly planted in their mind and conscience. [...] they asked themselves to what extent they would still be able to live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds; and they decided that it would be better to do nothing, not because the world would then be changed for the better, but simply because only on this condition could they go on living with themselves at all. Hence, they also chose to die when they were forced to participate. To put it crudely, they refused to murder, not so much because they still held fast to the command "Thou shalt not kill", but because they were unwilling to live together with a murder – themselves¹⁹.

In the same way, the «inability to think is not the "prerogative" of those many who lack brain power but the ever-present possibility for everybody – scientists, scholars, and other specialists in mental enterprises not excluded – to shun that intercourse with oneself whose possibility and importance Socrates first discovered»²⁰, by the same token, «thinking in its non-cognitive, non-specialized sense as a natural need of human life, the actualization of the difference given in consciousness, is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty of everybody»²¹.

The very few «who in the moral collapse of Nazi Germany remained completely intact and free of all guilt, you will discover that they never went through anything like a great moral conflict or a crisis of conscience [...] They never doubted that crimes remained crimes even if legalized by the government, and that it was better not to participate in these crimes

¹⁹ H. Arendt, *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*, in G. Kohn (ed.), *Responsibility and Judgment*, cit., p. 44.

²⁰ H. Arendt, *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, cit., pp. 187-188.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 187.

under any circumstances. In other words, they did not feel an obligation but acted according to something which was self-evident to them even though it was no longer self-evident to those around them. Hence their conscience, if that is what it was, had no obligatory character, it said, “This I *can't* do”, rather than, “This I *ought* not to do”»²². Here is the *nous* of Arendt’s Socratic-inspired morality. I will not commit evil acts because I *can't* do it, not because I *shouldn't*. I can’t do it, because if I did so, I would be contradicting myself. Moral conduct, when driven by the acceptance of an obligation, does not hinder carrying out evil acts if traditional morality’s duty not to kill is replaced by a commitment to kill which is asserted by a new common morality. It is up to the moral/political authority to determine what is good and what is evil. Respect for obligation can be translated into a merely unreflective adherence to rules.

However, Socrates, located rules *interiore homine*. Adherence to obligations is not due to the threat of punishment by an external authority, but so that an individual does not alienate himself.

Nevertheless, in any absence of interior conflict regarding which behaviour to adopt, the activity of thought is lost (such as the inclination to analyse and re-analyse) even when this is done in the intimate silence of interior dialogue. It would seem that the hermeneutics of thinking activity stops at the instant judgement is made, even if this is subjective (public dialogue is aimed toward searching for the truth in *doxa*, while interior dialogue focuses on the truth for oneself) and assumes a fixed form in its self-evidence. Yet if the pretence of universality was missing from subjective moral judgement, the activity of thinking as a philosophical pre-requisite of consciousness could not be the activity used to avoid carrying out evil.

If this interpretation is correct, the contradictory nature of Arendt’s philosophical thought would be attributable to the impossibility that she had in establishing a moral theory (or even a moral rule) in a historical-philosophical context which even saw the word “moral” called into question²³. Thought does not result in “good” actions «as though “virtue could be taught” and learned – only habits and customs can be taught, and we know only too well the alarming speed with which they are unlearned and forgotten when new circumstances demand a change in manners and patterns of behaviour»²⁴. It does not create values, «it will not find out, once

²² H. Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 78.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, cit., p. 5.

and for all, what “the good” is; it does not confirm but, rather, dissolves accepted rules of conduct. And it has no political relevance unless special emergencies arise. That while I am alive I must be able to live with myself is a consideration that does not come up politically except in “boundary situations”²⁵. On the other hand, as Arendt herself points out, «it looks as though what we are tempted to understand as a purely moral proposition actually arose out of the thinking experience as such»²⁶. In other words, thought does not produce good actions, nor create values; moral propositions derive directly from the experience of thought.

The activity of thinking leads man to himself and frees him from the externally-imposed yoke of obligation. Arendt’s conscience is not the little voice which reminds man of the obligation to respect moral precepts but the ability to be aware of himself in relation to what is more than himself only (consciousness);

Even though I am one, I am not simply one, I have a self and I am related to this self as my own self. This self is by means an illusion; it makes itself heard by talking to me – I talk to myself, I am not only aware of myself – and in this sense, though I am one, I am two-in-one and there can be harmony or disharmony with the self. If I disagree with other people, I can walk away; but I cannot walk away from myself, and therefore I better first try to be in agreement with myself before I take all others into consideration. This same sentence also spells out the actual reason it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong: if I do wrong I am condemned to live together with a wrongdoer in an unbearable intimacy...²⁷.

On the one hand Arendt challenges the self-evidence of religious precepts, on the other she does not clarify the basis of self-evidence in the rule “thou shalt suffer wrong rather than do it”, or put more simply, the warning to “do no evil” which dissenters readily adhere to without conflict or doubt. Self-evidence places rules on the level of universality and it is only men that are able to think who can comprehend the self-evidence of these rules. This is clear to men who undertake an interior dialogue to search for harmony in themselves and with themselves when judging and carrying out actions (in our literature, this would read in himself and with Him). In contrast to Arendt, we believe that this search can not end where there is self-evidence of a rule. The very complexity of reality calls into

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 192.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 183.

²⁷ H. Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 90. The two-in-one scenario reveals a religious side to existence – The Otherness of God – in a non-Arendt sense.

question self-evident precepts and encourages research into the sense of precept in relation to what we believe we are.

2. *The performativity of contemporary banal society*

In Hannah Arendt's view, the Holocaust was not a phenomenon; «it was not a “link” in a chain of causes and conditions, but an “event”, or the assumption of evidence for a fact which enshrines the uniqueness and complete irreducibility of what preceded it. In this sense, “fact” is already “theory”; describing or narrating it means merely illuminating it like a beam of light, matching it with alternative evidence from the past without this ever explaining or giving sense to it»²⁸.

The expression “banality of evil” gives rise to a genuine moral branch of philosophy²⁹.

Speaking today of «the banality of evil means questioning the context of dilettantism, shirking of responsibility and substantial inefficiency and belatedness of numerous moral arguments. The consequent difficulty of finding an appropriate language for moral topics leads us to do away with the empty words and ideas of sense, the automatism of our judgements and behaviour. At the same time, at a deeper level, the “banality of evil” defines a passivity of feeling, a paralysis of one's capacity to feel pain or love, pleasure or passion, good or evil deeds»³⁰.

Those ethics that are *without* – «ethics without ontology, ethics without God, ethics without name or rules, ethics without moral psychology, without problems of conscience and judgement or reasons for an action, taken from the latest styles, explanations in terms of cerebral mechanisms»³¹ – are proposals which develop in a social-historical context where indignation over repetitive acts of ferocity and senseless political choices results in a timid longing for ethics which are unable to go beyond the limits of relativism and reductionism³². This occurs in a society

²⁸ L. Boella, *Hannah Arendt. Agire politicamente, pensare politicamente*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2005, p. 108.

²⁹ Cfr. S. Forti, *I nuovi demoni. Ripensare oggi male e potere*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2012.

³⁰ L. Boella, *Il coraggio dell'etica*, Cortina, Milano 2012, p. 31.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 20.

³² The proliferation of ethical codes, in our opinion, is dictated by an ethics of minimums. The ethics of fleeing at a fundamental moment (questioned by science i.e. exact) has been reduced to a deontology, an obsession with sanctioning rules for action. Ethical codes within the field have

which I would define as *banal* in the Arendtian sense of the word.

Within our contemporary society of technological culture, the concept of banal evil has become “the culture of banal evil”³³, an evil that is not sought intentionally, but is occasionally provoked, freely or for futile reasons; the evil of action or inaction, of indifference, characterised by one fixed feature: the absence of thought or judgement. In technological culture, action is reduced to *button pushing*: «whoever pushes a button does so within an apparatus, where actions are so integrated and reciprocally conditioned that it is difficult to establish whether the person performing the gesture is *active* or in turn *driven*»³⁴. Technology, «indeed, does not have a purpose, it does not encourage sense, it does not open up scenarios of salvation, it does not liberate, it does not reveal the truth: technology *functions*»³⁵. It is not our *Weltanschauung* which determines the action, but it is the inconsistent, fragmentary, sporadic action which in some way sets out a type of unconscious vision. Actions, therefore, do not conform to axiological criteria; they do not fulfil the person who carries them out and they are not the result of a conscious decision. The simpler, more *banal* way they are decided upon/not decided upon sees them reach their desired practical end. However, as an unexpected and unsought-after result, they help to piece together the identity of the subject, like a jigsaw with non-fitting parts and this identity is just as inconsistent, fragmentary and sporadic as the actions themselves. In attempting to command technological society, dominant man has become its hybrid object. He has relinquished his inalienable privileges, which, shorn of their *nous*, now seem replicable (artificial consciousness, for example). He is an object of appraisal in the

proliferated, but there is no space to share a nucleus of definite, inalienable values. There are as many ethical codes as there are roles that people take on in everyday life, yet the moral dimension of individual existence remains elusive as so many roles encompass complex and consistent planning in their personal fulfilment. We could agree with Bauman that this fluctuating responsibility is “attributable to the role, not to the person who carries it out. And the role is not “I”, it is simply the work clothes which we wear the whole time we are carrying out our duties» (Z. Bauman, *Le sfide dell'etica*, Italian translation, Feltrinelli, Milano 1996, p. 25). If it is true that people cannot be identified by their roles, it is nevertheless also true that the way in which one performs a role complements one's moral vision, which must be uniform and not divided up among all the roles which we fulfil. Man is searching for ethics, but he is searching in the wrong place, he is searching outside himself. The moral being is the being who thinks about himself and at the same time relates to others who are phenomenologically different yet ontologically the same.

³³ For a first introduction you would read my *Lo sviluppo morale del fanciullo. Annotazioni filosofiche*, in *Studi e Ricerche*, Cacucci, Bari 2010, pp. 147-169.

³⁴ U. Galimberti, *La casa di psiche*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2005, p. 419.

³⁵ U. Galimberti, *L'ospite inquietante. Il nichilismo e i giovani*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2007, p. 21.

same way as any other object is, in quantitative terms rather than by virtue of his primary characteristics. The programme of positivist science has failed³⁶; in searching for the answers to the evils of man, it has sown new seeds of frequently deeper doubt and uncertainty on the destiny of humanity. It is “the era of sad passions”, a phrase adapted from Spinoza by Miguel Benasayag and Gerard Schmit to describe the *impotence* of scientific and technological power and the *breakdown* caused by a loss of faith in and disappointment with science itself³⁷. The malaise which man feels is existential, not pathological. Reality «has become utterly incomprehensible for everyone, young people in particular. It is no surprise that, given such impotence, the use of videogames flourishes; every young person, in a sort of computerised autism, becomes world leader in individual battles against nothing, on a pathway which leads nowhere. If everything seems *possible*, then no longer is anything *real*. It is in this virtual omnipotence that our society seems to be abandoning the sphere of thought»³⁸.

The characteristics of a technological society have ensured that the banality of evil has become a verified element within our culture.

Let us return to consider Arendt in the light of a surfeit of evil banality cases (teens dropping rocks on cars from motorway bridges or the young murderers of Nicola Tommasoli³⁹, for example) and question whether the activity of thought could stop a person from carrying out evil. Nowadays, as before, these actions seem to be the result of men and women who are incapable of thought. However, today there are no political systems that deprive us of reflexivity; instead, banality represents the norm for a society geared to *do* without thinking. In this sense, it is a performative society.

We can interpret three processes of banalization⁴⁰ or reduction in the capacity for reflexivity in today's society:

³⁶ This is not to demonise scientific progress *tout court*, but scientific reductionism (which reduces reality only to what is measurable) denies the perspective of sense (for man, with man) which scientific fields such as bioethics analyse.

³⁷ Cf. M. Benasayag, G. Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2004, p. 21.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 23.

³⁹ The story of Tommasoli's case is as following: during the night between 30th April and 1st May, in Verona, Tommasoli, a twenty-nine years old boy, was walking in a park with two other friends when a guy asked him for a cigarette and he refused. The boy had other four friends, all between twenty and twenty-five years old, staying there. All of them beaten savagely Tommasoli and his friends but unfortunately his consequent wounds were the most serious and led him to die few days later. This case raised a great concern in Italy about juvenile violence and it is very famous.

⁴⁰ Expression used by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958.

1. The hierarchical revolution in the relationship between science and technology, which has seen the dominance of the practical aspect over theory to the point where the spread of technology itself opens up new theoretical perspectives. This cultural tendency, as well as generating a general disinterest in activities such as thinking (considered useless when compared to practical action), may induce a form of moral automatism.
2. A loss of the concept of *Weltanschauung*, rendered superfluous by the acceleration of technical and scientific progress and post-modern complexity that makes any vision of the world obsolete and inadequate at the very moment of its development. Dominant-dominated man, narcissist and unreflective, has been afflicted by a form of individualism of preferences rather than a personalism of values, an individualism of emotions instead of a personalism of sentiments.
3. A weakening of proximity within relationships, which is also determined by a growing virtualisation of the relational experience, corresponding with a lethargy in individual responsibility. Increasing physical distance coincides with a decrease in empathetic reflection.

Moral law increasingly delegates the stigmatisation of behaviour to judicial law. Such behaviour is perceived as intolerable by our “moral intuition”, which, deprived of every founding opportunity, is incapable of conveying the good reasons that judge behaviour in terms of good or evil. All too often, law adopts the function of morality with all of the subsequent harmful consequences this entails. The recurrent penalisation of behaviour and the proliferation of increasingly specific and precise rules mark the insufficient nature of weak ethics, which «end up requiring strong political measures»⁴¹.

If the action of thinking is able to prevent the numerous mediocre demons of our time from committing evil, then what leads us to good? What is it that animates those few who have chosen to carry out good deeds?

⁴¹ A. Fabris, *Etica delle nuove tecnologie*, La Scuola, Brescia 2012, p. 49 notes. This section analyses the relationship between general and applied ethics that has emerged as a response to rising and specific problems, in particular those deriving from technological developments. As Fabris points out, faced with an ethical model «which sets out mostly incompatible scenarios», he abandons «the research for an ethical doctrine of reference for all which can justifiably guide people towards a shared choice» and as such «the possible tensions between different models of behaviour are usually dealt with not on a philosophical level as much as from the perspective of this comparison or that negotiation, which are in any case possible as part of a democratic context [...] It is an unfair situation since specifically ethical questions – so much so that they need to be dealt with by identifying and justifying universally valid criteria for human actions – cannot be resolved by seeking a compromise between the various theses that exist within the field» (*ivi*, p. 49).

Rather than the banality of evil, Simon Baron-Cohen prefers to use the concept of “empathy erosion” to explain evil behaviour in humanity. Empathy erosion «can arise because of corrosive emotions, such as bitter resentment, or desire of revenge, or blind hatred, or a desire to protect. In theory these are transient emotions; empathy erosion (is) reversible» in the absence of «permanent psychological characteristics»⁴². Through the study of the empathy circuit (*the Bell Curve*), we can evaluate individual levels of empathy. According to Baron-Cohn «empathy occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention [...] “Double-minded” attention means we are keeping in mind *someone else’s* mind at the very same time»⁴³. If we stop for a moment at this definition, which suggests «a separation of how we reflect on two minds at once (self and other)»⁴⁴, we rediscover the echo of Socrates’ “two-in-one”, on this occasion by means of emotion. Baron-Cohn’s interpretation does not seem convincing in its establishment of the *deficit* of empathy as the sole key in interpreting behaviour geared towards evil. How can the behaviour of men be explained who in family life assume behaviour dictated by high levels of empathy (Eichmann as a good family man) yet in other contexts, for example in carrying out their professional duty, commit atrocious acts (Eichmann as the bureaucrat of death)? Is empathy a situational characteristic or a predominantly stable capacity of an individual? In both cases, the activity of thought appears to be a determining factor. In an interior dialogue with oneself, an individual sets out on a silent, endless journey in search of the self, through and with The Other. A complex circularity is established between feeling and thought, even through moral imagination. As has been observed by Laura Boella, empathy «opens a door, already within the dynamic of emotion itself, the door which allows an individual to avoid considering reality as an impersonal objectivity or a mechanism to dominate but an element to “provide answers”, to relate to, understanding its quality as a living world, its field of vital, shared meanings, asking questions to those who give answers, engaging at both emotive and cognitive levels»⁴⁵. Nowadays, the rediscovery of reality «is an ethical gesture which requires imagination and its capacity to recreate universes of sense to multiply the possibility of being; while as a whole it maintains the

⁴² S. Baron-Cohen, *The Science of Evil: on Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*, Basic Books, New York 2011, pp. 22-23.

⁴³ *Ivi*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 33.

⁴⁵ L. Boella, *Il coraggio dell’etica*, cit., p. 39.

deviation between reality and fiction, between reality and desire. A need for “realism” explains this appeal to imagination as an expansion of the mind and a way of thinking in many different directions: opening the point of view of a single subject to its own obscurity and the point of view of others, recognising the limits of knowledge and action»⁴⁶.

Living in “the open air”, according to Laura Boella’s delightful description, requires courage. Not the courage needed to go beyond self-set limits (extreme selfies, to use a current example), but the courage to be oneself. Once again, we see Socrates’ parrhesiastic virtue in those who are *unable* to act in any other way than in accordance with the truth about themselves and not because “they *mustn’t*” in order to comply with an obligation. It is “indeed, only courage that instils us with the practical energy needed to transform act into action”⁴⁷.

Therefore, it can be seen that the teachings of Socrates, then as now, provide an antidote to the process of banalisation evident in current society, a factor that erodes both the capacity for reflexivity and the scope of relational proximity, resulting in a subtle dehumanisation of humanity and a reification of the persona.

Abstract

Within our contemporary society of technological culture, the concept of banal evil has become “the culture of banal evil”, an evil that is not sought intentionally, but is occasionally provoked, freely or for futile reasons; the evil of action or inaction, of indifference, is characterised by one fixed feature: the absence of thought or judgement. The teachings of Socrates, then as now, provide an antidote to the process of banalisation evident in current society, a factor that erodes both capacity for reflexivity and the scope of relational proximity, resulting in a subtle dehumanisation of humanity and a reification of the persona.

Keywords: thoughtlessness; banal evil; consciousness; empathy; courage.

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⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 175.

⁴⁷ D. Fusaro, *Coraggio*, Cortina, Milano 2012, p. 13.

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