

MORAL DISASTERS

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Abstract.- The present short review essay explores the definition of evilness contrasting three seminal works, *Narrating Evil*, a good book authored by Pia Lara, *Lucifer effects* in P. Zimbardo and *Violence* of S. Zizek. Although both texts represent contrasting view respecting to the moral disasters, what is important to discuss here is to what an extent, good people may act criminal acts. In former century, liberal theory postulated that evilness should be controlled in democratic countries. The law of people not only was sufficient to grant the individual liberties but also ensured the life of republic. This was nothing further from the truth.

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Some disasters, such as flood, quakes are caused by nature while others are triggered by the intervention of man. Mass-crime, genocide and other atrocities are acts which no before than XXth century, humankind was not accustomed to experience. Undoubtedly, the former century characterised by the upsurge of moral crisis, that not only destabilized the political-view but also waked up modern societies from its slumber. Following this argument, social science lacked of a term to denote what happened in WWII, describing the degree of sadism exhibited in the camps. Genocide was a word originally coined by Lemtkin to try to expand the existent understanding of what is a moral disaster. The problem was not given by the rise of Hitler to power, but because the effects of their decisions in the fields of legal jurisprudence. Nazi's acts defied everything what has been written according to the rights of people.

In this discussion, one of the most troubling aspects to define is evilness. For some scholars, it can be constructed by means of survivor eye-witness, while for others evil is socially negotiated always to protect the interest of status quo. Socially or individually determined, the fact is that evil should be placed under the lens of scrutiny, so that readers may expand their view of the issue. What would be interesting to discuss in this piece is to what an extent cosmologies contribute to fix the boundaries between good and evil. In this point is based the book *Narrating Evil*, authored by philosopher María Pia-Lara and recently

published by Gedisa Editorial (2009). In this valuable work, author explores the connection between the psychological effects of disasters, notion of justice with theory of reflexive judgement. Taking her cue from other scholars of the caliber of Arendt, Habermas, Adorno and Levi, Pia Lara argues that evilness can be described whenever the people come across with a point of convergence between their needs of justice, psychological trauma and moral stance about what the tragedy means. Events as Auschwitz or even the bloody dictatorships in Latin America are examples of that. Through this text we place the text of Pia Lara in discussion with other senior philosopher, Slavoj Zizek. We do consider both stances shed light on the question of ethic fields in a post-nietzschean world. Nonetheless some aspects of ethics about why genocide occurs are not duly resolved in Zizek. He is unable to explain why good people become to evil.

Most certainly, the existent understanding of genocides is possible due to critical filters that accommodate events into the view of morality. To some extent, she coins a new term for referencing those damages suffered by survivors of disasters, moral damage. Like in Auschwitz, suffering of victims cannot be expressed by words overtly. In order for specialists to understand the bloody events that encompassed the former century, it is necessary to employ a new vocabulary, more accurate to the hell civilians were facing in Auschwitz or Treblinka.

Once WWII ended, Lemkin employed a new term to describe what Nazis did in the camps, genocide where Gen comes from ethnicity and cide is equalled to cleansing. Like Arendt who created the totalitarianism to denote the sum of public power in one person, Lemkin was subject to a dilemma, give a name to an event that never before happened. This is exactly what Pia Lara says, means the "Reflexive Judgement". It helps philosophers and lay-people not only to understand the impacts of events and avoid similar disasters in future but also to reconstruct a moral history precisely of what Adorno called "nie wieder! – never again". Even though, one might accept how sadism and passion for cruelty are two much deeper sentiments that predominate in human nature, the reflexive judgement situates the conceptual framework necessary to avoid the evil at a later date. No matter than time or culture, human beings are underpinned in the belief that they are able to control the evilness and above all contingency but in practice this way of thinking not only does not allow changing the future but also condition our moral criticism to avoid a similar disaster at a latter day. Pia Lara acknowledges that intellectuals should take active participation to prevent moral disasters repeats.

The main thesis in her book is that imagination allows witnesses to express whatever is indescribable recurring to new linguistic terminologies that certainly creates their version of history. Therefore, the good stories, legends and myths are good simply because they restore the human condition and their inevitable propensity to evil. They narrate how the mythical archetype defied and defeated to evilness and how humans should behave in similar conditions. Nonetheless, Arendt has already demonstrated how the banality of evilness (in the case of Eichmann) sedates the moral consciousness even in scholars. It is important to denote that this exactly was the troubling role played by Heidegger during the Regime of National-socialism in Germany. The fact is that the exacerbation of

instrumentality works as a mechanism to shape the moral view of events is often present in authoritarian governments. The fearful nature of Nazi's atrocities suggests that not only they have been planned but also executed with downright impunity and moral indifference about what the suffering of others meant.

Around the human suffering, totalitarian regimes need of a radicalization of politics for gaining more legitimacy. Everyone of us was and is subject to frustrating events. Totalitarianism has the ability to recycle the human frustration into sublimated and disciplined behaviour. Based on the promise of eternal happiness for community all, totalitarian leaders subjugate the individual view into a coherent all-embracing gaze. Like in Arendt, in Pia Lara the nature of evil consists in exterminating the individualism, no matter than the political organization may be. The history is witness how some bloody dictatorship has resulted from democracies. In doing so, totalitarian regimes upends the existing moral values to lead people into a moral nihilism. This tactics are often accompanied with a process of under-valorization of ethnic-minorities. Ethics does not apply whenever personhood is radically expelled from its humanity. Dealing persons as goods, totalitarian states monopolize the force into a much broader discourse, where the otherness is subject to sameness.

These policies are politically aimed at dissuading viewers and audience their own practices are the correct. The moral basis for the radical destruction of otherness needs of certain complicity to the extent of localizing to a palpable enemy who can be targeted of all collective frustrations. The process of construction of a foe can be created by means of the articulation of a false-conspiracy where the other is gradually dehumanized. In this conjuncture, our language plays a pivotal role in re-elaborating new meaning and terms to legitimate the totalitarian policies. This means no other thing that the process of dehumanization corresponds with a compulsory need to label the other according to certain negative stereotypes to the extent of being a hazard for common-well being.

Moreover, it is important not to loose the sight that the process of dehumanization is enrooted in the cultural background of society. Potential victims are targeted as enemies of State simply because they have been excluded from their right as corporal body. One might speculate that the human rights of Jews (regardless their profession) were surely violated once they were divested from their rights as German citizens. This would never have been possible without the previous historical background in XVII and XVIIIth centuries that paved the ways for a wider sentiment of anti-Semitism already existent in the core of Europe. Under this tragic conjuncture, a point that immediately surfaces is ¿what should be the role of philosophy in this process?, ¿should we take a proactive stance before a totalitarian regime?.

In sharp contrast with S. Zizek, Pia Lara acknowledges that it is strongly necessary to enhance our moral current understanding of disasters to construct an archetype whose guidelines can illuminate people in darkness. The moral evolution is the only way to prevent calamities as Auschwitz, but it is important to say here that there is an implicit danger when officials in quest of further

legitimacy, manipulate politically the spectrum of moral damage simply because these policies created a show-case and spectacle of disaster that paved the ways for the advent of new stronger one. Reminders of what Auschwitz or Argentine's dictatorship were should be once again re-placed under the lens of scrutiny, quite aside of the monopoly of one-sided vision. A debate should be done accumulating different views and perspectives of involved social actors. Otherwise, we run the risk to prepare the conditions for the surfacing of a new dictatorship; the cynical dictatorship of human rights. The critical philosophy should examine and discuss to what extent the victims do not become in executioners; simply because boundaries among ones and others seem to be very tight.

At a closer look, María Pia-Lara's account corresponds with an innovative project that explores the profundity of trauma with the needs of revenge and the social-structures that allowed a moral-disaster may certainly take room. This represents valuable efforts to connect the criticism of Frankfurt schooling with the postmodern excepticism of S. Zizek and Neomarxian School, a point underexplored in specialized literature that will start scholars talking in next year, above all in Latin America where the wounds of past will take some time before they get over. This is perhaps one of the problems in the argument of Pia-Lara. Whilst Zizek calls to hold of reacting before the moral cynicism of late-capitalism, she is convinced that scholars should take a moral stance based on criticism. To what an extent, such a stance may exert influence in other minds to legitimate other dictatorship is a troubling issue unresolved in the Lara's argument. In order for readers to understand further about this matter, let me clarify the argument of Zizek respecting to how symbolic violence can be downrightly exerted by capitalism.

Following this, Zizek recognizes that the modern propensity to exert violence under the figure of sovereignty is circumscribed to the manipulation bio-power and the principle of shortage which is based on the notion of uncertainty and contingency. That way, concepts such as risk, hazards and fear seems to be functional to the monopoly of power of elite. From the Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem to the postmodern terrorism, the bourgeois culture characterizes by an excess of instrumentalism and rationalization and of course by the spectacle of victimization. For that reason, the symbolic imposition of meaning constitutes as the primary form of violence West cynically exerts over the rest of globe. Charity, sympathy and victimization play an important role in order for elite to maintain their status-quo. The shocking for disasters, calamities and tragedies prevent people to understand the real causes which ushered into a situation of such a nature (Zizek, 2009: 12). The horror of violence rests on what cannot be said. In this vein, academician's thesis become in ideological discourses not necessarily for what they stress but for what they silenced. Ideology works as a dream, whereas the surface remains credible, the core is false.

For Zizek, Pia Lara is wrong simply because she does not recognize that modernity has changed the moral values, to the extent of reconfiguring their boundaries. What yesterday was good, today is evil and vice-versa. In a world where good is evil, and evil is good, the best course of action is passivity. Zizek adds, the notion of false-urgency seems to be coined in observance of the last

natural and made-man disaster ranging from the current Haiti's earthquake or Katrina's hurricane in US. Whenever these types of tragic events whipped to poorer sector of the society, people donated their own properties in assistance of victims or survivors. It is not surprising to see a considerable volume of financial assistance has been bestowed to peripheral countries in moment of human-emergency but far-away of reversing the miserable conditions these countries stand, these types of campaigns reinforces the financial dependence that potentiated the crippling aftermaths of disaster. Our best emotions and intentions are recycled by international corporations which exploits the needs and suffering of citizenry. Under the promise of well being, charity aims to enhance the profits of the same corporation that caused the state of emergency.

From this perspective, Zizek distinguishes two sorts of violences, objective and subjective. The former refers to indoctrination exerted by the system by means of ideology, police and State whereas the latter denotes the possibility to identify and demonize to whom we consider the source of violence. In Zizek's view, the subjective and objective violence are inextricably intertwined. In addition, one of his upshots is that postmodernity is blurring the boundaries between victims and culprits. The same Israel that has suffered the Nazi's oppression is replicating now these techniques of tortures over Palestine's population.

Starting from the premise that fear cuts the phenomenological worldview in two, home is seen as safe while outer is dangerous. The intimacy of others, exhibits the role played by politics to exacerbate some events while others are ignored. Zizek envisages that once a disaster obliterated a community, the reasons behind the events are covered in order for the status quo not to collapse. Lay people appeal to solidarity and charity to help others, but this not only is not enough, unfortunately aggravates the problems. The conditions that facilitated the disasters are not solved. Disasters not only show the worse of societies but give the condition to material asymmetries, which are triggered by capital, to be perpetuated. Although Katrina showed the misery of US, media portrayed another discourse. Wasp's racism reappeared on agenda in US declaring the inferiority of blacks to live harmoniously in moment of emergencies. Whatever viewers were experiencing would be a supposed explanation about the aggression inherited to blacks. This tactics of blaming the victims, Zizek adds, are enrooted into the language which amplifies the contrasting differences between self and other. The false urgency combined with a cynic charity, are two of the points Pia Lara does not see in her development. Zizek argues convincingly that remains a hermeneutic circle between dominated and dominators; moral disasters are only the results of these ties.

Most certainly, the book of Phillip Zimbardo, based on the polemic Stanford experiment may illustrate the confusing points. In his new work, the Lucifer effects, Zimbardo explains that classical definition explains that evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others. From his view-point, rather, evil represents an incrementalist thing, which all we are able to do depending on the social context. Since our human nature is being changed constantly, evil-doers not

necessarily are super-natural entities or monsters; they are humans who only want to be accepted by others. The most polemic side of Zimbardo's thesis points out a good man may become evildoers at a later date if some environmental variables are facilitated. The dispositional theory may be of help for readers of understanding (not judging) the evolutionary nature of evilness.

Following this argument, enriched by some empirical-cases this book explores the nature of evil throughout the polemic Stanford Prison experiment as well as the denounces of human right violations in Abu Ghraib prison. He offers substantial evidence that people seem to be influenced by powerful situational forces where the self is faced with a new setting. Somehow, people and rules are in an ongoing state of negotiation. Our psychological nature of perception reveals that the significance of other acts are examined following dispositional than situational "qualities", while we are prone to justify our behaviour limiting our acts to situational contexts.

Zimbardo presents the example of inquisition as the most vivid paradox that explains how evil evolves. While Church and states devoted considerable efforts, time and money to fight the evil, their methods were so evil that generated a large-scale suffering as never before. The tactics of torture not only represented the ultimate innovation of human sadism, but also they do not achieve their primary goal, this means the extermination of witches from Europe. To shed light on this point, Zimbardo develops a theory of power, which is based on the role played by ideology in mediating between self and its institutions.

The power, at some extent, would be enrooted in much deeper system whose values are carefully selected and socialized. The process of indoctrination, this means the use of disciplinary instruments, appeals to the resistance and vice-versa. The legitimacy of elites rests on in their abilities to design the values, rules and laws, the rest of citizens should obey. It is surprising to see, the direction of majority is widely accepted by almost all members, by fear or doubt. To put this in another way, power lies on the persons (elite) who design the legal framework of institutions, while resistance emerges only when the rule is applied. Under some conditions, the world of morality goes against the rules. Zimbardo adds, philosophy has witnessed how torture and human right violation are easier to be digested if the other-body is dehumanized. The archetype of enemy, as another who wants to destroy us, as a community, not only can be encouraged by unscrupulous politics, but also paves the ways for the advent of evilness. The stereotyped concepts of the others often accompany with a public fear, which legitimates policies and practices, that otherwise would be rejected. Even, a state, which supposedly is oriented to ensure the collective well being, may fall under the paradox of evil. The following paragraph seems to be self-explanatory:

"The most extreme instance of this hostile imagination at work is of course when it leads to genocide, the plan of one people to eliminate from existence all those who are conceptualized as their enemy. We are aware of some of the ways in which Hitler's propaganda machine transformed Jewish neighbours, co

workers, even friends into despised enemies of state who deserved the “final solution”. (p. 11).

And of course, genocides and rapes are not only blamed to Hitler's regime, the XXth century has faced serious ethical dilemmas respecting to the rights of intervening states that are suspected of ethnic-cleansing, genocide and other atrocities. This point suggests that moral disasters are condemned to be repeated, if people do not learn the lessons. But may we have a lesson for this?.

Professor Zimbardo will respond that ordinary men can be directed to commit evil acts if the morality can be disabled. Like compassionate behaviour, cruelty selects some moral values ignoring. Any physical abuse, perpetrated against prisoners (plotting a parallel between Stanford Experiment in Us soil and Abu Ghraib in Iraq) denotes not only the degree of impunity (understood as the avoidance to punishment) but also the vulnerability of prisoners, some of them subject to an ideological discourse. One might speculate that the conformity of self respecting to laws would explain why evilness surfaces. It is important not to lose the sight that good men placed in bad atmospheres, can adapt their values to do what the rest do. If torture, crime and other human right violations are allowed accordingly to a previous process of dehumanization, mechanism often employed to reduce the inner dissonance, it is only question of time until he adapts his environmental values.

A good person may be an evil doer when chooses the “tyranny of conformity”, or the blind obedience to unmoral orders. Of course, although anonymity offers some shelter for self-doubting personalities, this does not represent a pretext. It is interesting to see how in some contexts, guards may encourage acts of sadism alluding to order-abiding behaviour. In this token, Zimbardo brilliantly goes on to acknowledge that *“my earlier research highlighted the power of masking one's identity to unleash aggressive acts against other people in situations that gave permission to violate the usual taboos against interpersonal violence”* (p. 25).

The expectative of social role is shaped by the set of rules, as the way they are fixed. Guard vs. prisoner orientations seems to be determined by the disciplinary mechanism of power, which adjusts the boundaries of morality. First of all, to justify acts of humiliation on inmates, guards stated they presented serious problems or exhibited as trouble-makers. What is more than important to discuss in Zimbardo's book is that detour of one, feeds the violence and its pertinent justifications in others. The dialectic relationship between dominators and dominated is based on the discourse of violence. Unlike Abu Ghraib's prison, Stanford experiment has not allowed real weapons. The sentiment of subordination has been centred on a mindful disposition of agents to occupy their roles. Guards behaved as real guards, while prisoners were real prisoners. In doing so, guards prioritized to ensure the sense of security of their institutions, though their acts violated the human condition of life. At the Stanford experiment, order was indeed maintained until everything went out of control. This research demonstrated two things, first and foremost, emulations may be enable real reactions, and secondly, the psychological fear serves as a

disciplinary temporal tactic, which sooner or later leads towards social disobedience. The paradox of Lucifer effects, the metaphor Zimbardo used, lies in the fact that disobedience corresponds with reason and effects of law and order. Guards recur to violent tactics upon inmates because they want to keep the order and prisoners falls in the dichotomy to accept and defy this authority. They passively accept their role as prisoners, until the revolts. This means to Zimbardo's preliminary words in the preface, evilness attracts but repels at the same time. This valuable book reminds us that the potential of perversion is enrooted in human nature, when conformity and obedience upends the subject individuality. Surely, the process of dehumanization makes the things easier for those who are committing a crime (this is exactly what Zimbardo called moral disengagement). To set an example, if a guard rejects an order to violate the condition of any prisoner, that guard must not only be degraded but also transformed in a prisoner. This seems to be what Lucifer's downfall emulates.

To cut the long story short, the moral order is symbolic. If the personhood is excluded from the circle of humankind, morality should not be applied on to protect the integrity of the victim. Being putting aside some groups from the sphere of humanity, dehumanizers gain impunity to make what they want. Whenever people stand objectified as things or goods, what they suffer are not considered crimes, in the strict sense of the word. The passivity of some actors or evil of inaction, explains why the agent opts not to take a course of action, when its ontological safety is at risk. A good worker in a certain organization may do terrible things, without any will to do it. This type of alienated-mind, well described by Arendt, allows evil to flourish.

On a closer look, Zimbardo argues convincingly that situation and institutions matters simply because people are not passive objects. They select the convenient behaviour according to the climate they stand, optimizing the benefits to minimize the costs. These are the logics that remained behind any massacre, or genocide. The following excerpt reflects the explicit argument of the project:

“People usually select their settings they will enter or avoid and can change the setting by their presence and their actions, influence others in that social sphere, and transform environment in myriad ways. More often than not, we are active agents capable of influencing the course of events that our live take and also of shaping our destinies. Moreover, human behaviour and human societies are greatly affected by fundamental biological mechanisms as well as cultural values and practices” (p 320)

To be honest, this pungent investigation contrasts with the classical idea that people exerts full-control on their acts (sometimes undermining the situational factors), as well as it provides a fertile ground for expanding the philosophical understanding of evil. This is a masterful work, highly suggested by specialists in criminality, legal justice and imprisonment-related theories. The dynamics of how the notion of evil-perpetrators works, this is the main credit of Zimbardo, runs in parallel with heroic deeds. The “banality of evil” can be equalled to the ordinary of heroism. The meanings of acts are framed by the cultural conjuncture. Following the rhetoric of Zimbardo, heroic status connotes social

attributions, which confers honour for one person for their acts, but not for their effects. Per the system of values in certain group, a suicidal terrorist can be named as hero whereas in other circumstance, the same behaviour is morally condemned as an act of cowardice. Definitions of heroism are socially negotiated respecting to aspects associated to culture and time. Additionally, our psyche does encompass neither good nor evil. Both behaviours, undoubtedly, surface only if situation leads to play a role, which moves individuals to act in a special way, from inaction to action. At the same time, under these matrixes one may help or harm others, depending upon the institutional goals.

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