
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND RESPONSIBILITY IN ELIE WIESEL'S VIEW NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE HOLOCAUST

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Abstract

The aim of this text is to identify in Sandu Frunză's philosophical discourse based on Elie Wiesel's work a few expressions of the evil in the world from the perspective of an ethic of responsibility. Between the inexpressible and the expressed, inaction and action, world and anti-world, memory and oblivion, total evil is also revealed as a form of indifference. In Sandu Frunză's philosophical approach, indifference is the main explanation for the presence and manifestation of total evil in the world. This makes the author consider indifference as the main argument in favour of an ethic of responsibility.

Keywords: Holocaust, bad memory, oblivion, indifference, ethical responsibility, Elie Wiesel, Sandu Frunză

1. Introduction

The problem of evil in the world has prompted lengthy discussions of philosophical, theological and anthropological issues. However, the subject is far from being exhausted. It recurs in contemporary debates whenever evil occurs, be it in its soft forms or in its tough forms, totally, relentlessly. Many authors have contended that the evil is consubstantial with the human and social existence. It can be interpreted as an ingredient of what Nicolas Cusanus called *coincidentia oppositorum*, the absence of goodness, the other side of the coin or a cosmogonic principle, if we take into account a number of myths where the evil plays an important part in the economy of Creation [1].

However, things are even more nuanced when it comes to the testing and managing of the evil in the world.

The work *God and the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Work. An Ethics of Responsibility* signed by professor Sandu Frunză brings to the fore the issue of the presence and manifestation of the evil in the world. Elie Wiesel and the terrifying experience of the Holocaust that Wiesel himself and the Jewish people

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have lived are in the background of the author's approach. If at the level of ideas and lofty thinking the issue of evil can be justified and even accepted, at the level of actual experience things are different, especially when it comes to absolute evil as an active manifestation, which is controlled and aimed at exterminating a community, a people or a culture. In this respect, Sandu Frunză shows from the offset that "the presence of the evil short-circuits the communication between the individual and divinity, it explains the crisis of inter-human relations, and it makes room for the emergence of suffering, violence and death as part of everyday norm" [2].

God and the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Work is a study that captures the essence of Wiesel's literary work. As Ilie Rad highlights, it is built around two poles that interact constantly. "On the one hand, there is a nocturnal register (indifference, sadness, suffering and death), on the other hand, a diurnal register (accountability, memory, hope and joy of being alive)" [3]. Thus, the issue of evil can be pursued in several books that embrace these dichotomous perspectives: the inexpressible—the expressible, action-non-action, world—anti-world, indifference-accountability, memory—oblivion. We aim to identify a few such expressions/categories of evil.

2. The evil as an inexpressible experience

Philosophically speaking, the *inexpressible* is related to the metaphysical and the transcendental. Given their exceptional nature, significances can hardly be passed on and grasped. At most, they let themselves be revealed through paradoxical expressions and experiences. Rudolf Otto, for instance, shows that the absolute is "something utterly different" [4] which is received through conflicting feelings that are strong and paradoxical. In the case of absolute evil, the inexplicable lies in the incapacity of reason to justify genocide and to explain an experience of the limit. Actually, the one who has had the experience of the absolute evil feels that it is inexpressible and incomprehensible to the others. Certainly in this case experiences and feelings can only be contradictory and absolute.

God and the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Work. An Ethics of Responsibility, signed by an excellent specialist of Jewish philosophy, purports to transfer the inexpressible, the inexplicable, and the absurdity of absolute evil in the sphere of Philosophy and Theology. By evoking Seeskin's endeavour to explore a few classical perspectives on the issue of evil, the author argues that the evil is under the sign of mystery and of the inexpressible, and that reason fails to formulate a convenient theory of the evil. From this perspective, Sandu Frunză captures an interesting parallel approach to the view of Elie Wiesel and Richard L. Rubenstein. The conclusions reached by the author from Cluj lead to answers of serious consequence. The evil, interpreted either as divine punishment and as "ultimate expression of God's plans" or as "a crime on the part of ruthless people, which fails to justify God's punishment bestowed upon an entire people" [2, p. 17] makes the two authors discuss God's representation in the Judaic

tradition. While Wiesel endorses a traditional Hasidic form of divine presence, Rubenstein pleads for a total rupture with tradition and the representations of God. "This argument has a certain ring of the idea that infers God's inexistence as a conclusion of the evil's presence and action in the world." [2, p. 18] As a matter of fact, as Vianu Mureşan noticed, the psycho-social explanations fail to be a complete argument for a Jew as long as the destiny of the individual and of the whole community is ontologically related to God [5]. Consequently, the good and the evil acquire much deeper connotations, they can be the expression of divine will, but especially of the relation between God and the chosen people.

Therefore, the evil is the absence of goodness. The hallucinating and terrifying experiences of the evil in the world paralyse the relation with divinity. It is suspended and when it becomes radical, God's death is proclaimed, even in its cultural expression.

Likewise, the revelation of the concrete expressions of absolute evil finds an obstacle in the limits of language and those of our experiences, which fail to cover something that should be at least similar or comparable. The apocalyptic scenes described by Wiesel in *The Night* [6] can nevertheless send shivers down our spines.

"I trod on bodies fallen to the ground. I trod on smashed faces. But I could hear no scream, just a few moans. My father and I were crushed down by the mob rolling like a wave...I tried to rid myself of my invisible enemy. My whole desire to live had gathered in my nails. I strove to get a bit of air into my lungs...I scratched and tore to pieces a rotting body, which gave no sign of pain." [2, p. 153]

Sandu Frunză notices the subtlety of Wiesel's message which, through the depiction of evil, sheds light on the power of life and survival. The march of death is not so much a march of extermination as one of life and victory over death [2, p. 152]. Therefore, Sandu Frunză captures two ways in which the inexplicable absolute evil in the world is saved through *explicative* formulae which are more or less different: a tragic one which declares that "God is dead", and an optimistic one which shows that life itself cannot be vanquished. They *express* a note of reserve towards divinity, and value the experience of survival despite all challenges. It is certain that between the inexpressible and the expressible, the Holocaust concentrates an impressive and troubling experience which is hard to accommodate into acceptable explicative patterns.

3. The evil as an anti-world of this world

In its absolute forms, the evil goes beyond any reasonable interpretation. It could describe an *anti-world* in which everything is reversed: the inexplicable, the illogical, the inexpressible become the coordinates of normality. For many people, the Holocaust describes such a world. All its elements lack logical substance and seem to be turned upside down. Professor Sandu Frunză dwells on a scene in *The Night* which describes the execution of a young man "with the looks of an angel".

In a normal rational world, his death is absolutely superfluous and it makes no sense. Taking over E. Fackenheim's formulation, Sandu Frunză stresses the fact that the anti-world "is a crazy world where nothing can occur unless it is impregnated with the logic of an anti-world. There is madness in every single act of life and that is why it looks transfigured." [2, p. 164]

A number of hallucinating experiences of the Holocaust when the victims turn into exterminators, and some of the latter category become more humane and develop feelings of compassion or give a hand are evoked by the survivors. Apart from these, scenes evoking lofty sacrifice and high treason intertwine and cohere in the picture of a world upside down, an anti-world. While for the physicists the anti-world belongs in the sphere of matter and is a mirror upside-down image of *our world*, in our case the world and the anti-world survive together here on Earth, although they are governed by rules, norms and arguments which are turned upside down. After all, this coexistence is a sign of probably the most paradoxical duality at the level of human values. In the author's view, this paradox contaminates the attitudes towards evil. "When set free from the concentration camp, the children ignored the bread and cakes so generously offered by the American soldiers, left behind their feelings of hatred for their killers, ignored any other comfort or joy, they abandoned everything for the sake of praying to a God that had abandoned them all along their life in the extermination camps." [2, p. 174] Of course, from a rational perspective, such an attitude makes hardly any sense, it can pass for a sequence of an anti-world or even for an expression of a cultural and religious tradition. As a matter of fact, this gesture can make sense in our world only if it is related to a transcendental dimension and to some ultimate values.

4. The evil as action and non-action

Elie Wiesel's God and the Holocaust is a book about the action of absolute evil in the world. Reflections on this theme can also be found in texts published in English by Sandu Frunză [7-9]. Sandu Frunză succeeds in capturing two distinct aspects simultaneously: the philosophical reflection of the Holocaust's evil, and the shocking evidence of the evil manifestation in the concentration camps as revealed by Wiesel's experience of it. However, we should take heed of the fact that a whole world of ideas and of the concrete representation of a purely ideological motivation underpin the manifestation of evil. Thus, the 'Arian mission' of creating a new human being is designed to clash against a 'Jewish conspiracy'. "No other genocide so far had been so strongly endorsed by myths, hallucinations, by an abstract ideology completely devoid of any pragmatic dimension – which was then enforced through very rational and pragmatic means." [10] Ideologies underpinned by religious beliefs and representations can generate cruel strategies and actions which are hard to imagine. The potential and the act are two sides of the evil. It is its manifestation in the world that makes the difference. Without being translated into acts, ideas are mere speculations and whims of the imagination. In *The Holocaust*:

Definition and Preliminary Discussion Yad Vashem defined the Holocaust by stressing the active side of the evil which aimed not merely to kill (a banal act in this case), but do debase, dehumanize and exterminate a whole group of people. Therefore, the Holocaust “is defined as the *sum of all actions taken against the Jews* during the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945: from the deprivation of the German Jews of their economic and legal status in the 1930s, the segregation and starvation of the Jews in various occupied countries, to the extermination of almost 6 million Jews in Europe. The Holocaust is part of a larger context of acts of oppression and genocide committed by the Nazis against several ethnic and political groups in Europe”, Yad Vashem argues [10]. The action of evil takes its concrete form in troubling figures and evidence. According to statistics, the Jews killed during the Holocaust amount to a figure between 5.1 million and 5.75 million [11]. Raul Hilberg argues that this figure includes “over 800,000 Jews” whose death was a consequence of “being forced to live in ghettos and all sorts of other privations”; 1,400 000 killed by “being shot to death in public spaces”; and “almost 2,900,000” who died in concentration camps (Konzentrationslager). A number of 3,000,000 Jews who died in Poland, completes the casualty list [12].

There is no doubt that these figures and the atrocities behind them are awful. However, Sandu Frunzã argues that non-action is as awful. Thus, the evil can be accommodated into the equation: potential–action–non-action. Therefore, the action of the evil is a sign of non-action. The evil as an active form of manifestation was possible also because its manifestation was opposed by no form of resistance, no reaction on the part of the civilized world, which became a mere spectator of the atrocities [13]. The paradox is that “...the events occurred in a cultural context that we deem to be built on the values of tolerance, communion, respect and dialogue” [2, p. 37]. When it reaches its limit, non-action can be considered a passive kind of evil, though this kind is as important as any other.

5. The evil as indifference

Elie Wiesel’s view of the Holocaust focuses on the idea that it was indifference that made the evil possible. “I have always thought that the opposite of culture is not ignorance, but indifference. That the opposite of morality is not immorality, but again indifference.” [2, p. 101] As a matter of fact, the issue of indifference can be found in a nutshell in one of the most quoted maxims on this topic: “The sleep of reason produces monsters” (Goya). The Holocaust is one of these monsters. Starting from Wiesel’s discourse about indifference, Professor Sandu Frunzã captures the ins and outs of a complex philosophical issue which is recurrent in post-Holocaust literature [14, 15]: *God’s indifference and the world’s indifference*. While divine indifference is not covered by a philosophical hermeneutic and finds secure ground in the realm of tradition and Theology, human indifference, in Wiesel’s view, supposedly has its origin in the Christian doctrine whose aim is a ‘sanctification of death’. “This familiarity with the issue

of death as a central element of Christian faith underpins the Christians' indifference towards the innocent." [2, p. 101] On the other hand, K. Roth argues that Wiesel fails to notice a double process in the Christian religion: *assuming death* and turning it into *a spring of life* [2, p. 5]. Contemporary authors show that the civilized Western world, irrespective of faith, lives in a culture driven by individualism. This might generate a fissure in the relation with the Other, which goes hand in hand with an inflation of the ego. For Wiesel, a character with religious and philosophical propensities, the world's indifference cannot be sorted out in any other way than by resorting to the possibilities offered by the two perspectives of analysis and interpretation. Thus, the approach suggested by Wiesel is a characteristic of the Judaic philosophical thinking. In *Philosophy and Judaism* [16] Sandu Frunză argues that it is the intersection of two emblematic cultural spaces: Jerusalem and Athens. This explains why the author of the well-known novel *The Night* considers that the main problem of Judaism and Christianity is precisely that of building a theology and an ethics of responsibility. Consequently, he pleads for a revision of "the traditional paradigm of interpretation, understanding and representation, etc. and an attitude of facing the questions and standpoints of the new context. The post-Holocaust world can no longer work along the parameters of the world before it." [2, p. 80] The historical experience of absolute evil demonstrates that indifference is the main enemy of both our fellow beings and of ourselves. While divine indifference is more likely to be accepted since it is endorsed by religious myths, beliefs and doctrines, human indifference is harder to accept and to grasp. It seems to lack theological and metaphysical underpinning and, moreover, it can be endlessly reproduced through its effects. The world's indifference can generate indifference towards ourselves, as Octavian Paler argued in *Subjective Mythologies* [17].

Some reflections on the topic of indifference stress the fact that it is also based on a boomerang principle: it hits back on us and on the world. "Don't fear your enemy, the worst he can do is kill you. Don't fear your friend, the worst he can do is betray you. But fear indifference. Because by its silence, its tacit accord, it can kill you and betray you." (N. Mihalkov) [18]

6. The evil as oblivion

Another dimension of the evil captured by Sandu Frunză in *Elie Wiesel's God and the Holocaust* is that of *oblivion*. Along with indifference, it is one of the passive ingredients of the evil. This is not to diminish any of their harmful effects, on the contrary, it adds to the total harm. That is why Wiesel does not consider oblivion as a remedy, forgiveness [19] or as a therapeutic strategy meant to tone down the effect of painful memories which could fuel hatred and hard feelings. For him, oblivion is rather a form of neglect and ignorance. "Oblivion is the sister of negligence. The survivors have the responsibility of abandoning the logic of absence and of getting the people and God out of neglect and indifference." [2, p. 140] Wiesel opposes oblivion to memory, as a

source of faith' throughout history. Thus, he joins those who promote a memory purged of its ideological functions. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, argues for the danger entailed by collective memory. *Repressed, manipulated and compulsory memory* generate, to the French author's mind, the premises of certain kinds of abuse. That is why he pleads for *fair memory* which should occur in time and history, and which might oppose exacerbated memorials and deep amnesia [19]. In Elie Wiesel's view, this is expressed through the responsibility generated by an *existential memory*. "Do not ever struggle against memory. Even when it is painful; it will help you, it will reward you, it will make you richer. After all, what would culture be without memory? What would love for a friend be without the possibility of remembering it the next day? You cannot live without memory. You cannot exist without remembering things." [2, p. 140] The remedy for oblivion and the evil is memory and this "implies at least the responsibility of confession, and confession is, for instance, the substance of *The Night*" [20]. However, a fair memory would give everybody a chance of committing themselves to themselves and to the world in a responsible way. Being the opposite of the evil and oblivion, *existential memory* gets very close to what Tzvetan Todorov called *exemplar memory* [21].

A genuine ethics of responsibility is possible to the extent to which memory becomes an instrument able to release emotional tension and to allow for a transcendence from the particular to the general, from event to model.

7. Conclusions

We have identified a few forms of the evil in the world as they are highlighted in Sandu Frunzã's analysis of Elie Wiesel's works. Of course, its faces are far more numerous than shown here. Our capacity of surviving, of coping with the evil in the world and its actual manifestation may exceed our power of identifying and destroying it. "By learning how to oppose to certain forms of the evil, we continue to be the prisoners of powerlessness and ignorance." [5] Although it cannot be an abstract virtue, as Vianu Mureșan argued, the ethics of responsibility has a certain pedagogical value. Moreover, it calls for a certain vigilance of the spirit which may turn into attitudes and patterns of behaviour.

That is why *Elie Wiesel's God and the Holocaust* by Sandu Frunzã is unique in the Romanian literature on this topic. Within it covers some concrete expressions of the absolute evil find their analysis at various levels: philosophically, theologically, ethically, and as literature. This is another instance when Jewish literature lends itself to approaches that shed light on a hermeneutic of the negative [22]. At the same time, the book is an excellent exegesis of Elie Wiesel's thinking and work. It gives its author the opportunity of building a theoretical argument that should endorse an *ethics of responsibility*.

All these show the reader a complex *oeuvre* that proposes new perspectives of approaching the evil and responsibility, which will never cease to challenge our minds. The author's expertise, professor Sandu Frunză being one of the best specialists of Judaic philosophy in Romania, is reflected in the quality of style, bibliography and interpretive subtleties.

All these come together into a special intellectual experience which will certainly be an antidote of oblivion and indifference.

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