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Violence, Charity, and Generosity: A Philosophical Reflection.

We live in a peculiar world. Violence is everywhere – yet, compared to the previous century, our daily lives are rarely under the threat of war. Violence still presents itself in association with some of its traditional features: religion, ethnicity, nationality, social inequality and unrest… Today, though, open warfare is rare; declarations of war, as we have known them for centuries, have disappeared; and we hardly witness the military order of armies deployed one against each other in the battlefields – what the Greeks called a *kosmos*.

Violence rather leaks into our daily lives through irregular forms of confrontation, such as ethnic conflicts, migrants' and refugees crisis, terrorism and religious fundamentalisms, and many other unfortunate situations that you can think of. It is almost as if violence, by becoming global, had lost its own order, or at least the order that we were historically acquainted with. How can philosophy help describe this new situation?

In a recent treatise on violence, a Canadian philosopher, James Mensch (2008), invited to turn down "the paradigm that equates freedom and sovereignty, sovereignty itself being taken as self-sufficiency and mastery". Mensch refers here to political life, but the choice of terms could not be more significant from a philosophical standpoint.

Philosophers have since long been aware of the dogmatic fallout of a sovereign conception of the subject. In extreme synthesis, and referring to modern Western philosophy, we can summarize it by saying that Cartesian subjectivity merges in the cogito the transcendental and the empirical subjects of knowledge: in short, it reduces the historical set of norms, formal rules and concepts that form our conceptual heritage to an empirical consciousness – or, more precisely, to its ontological hypostasis.

This is why the critical tradition from Kant to Husserl has described the process of knowledge as a relational function, an interaction between two poles – subjectivity and objectivity – that only exist as such during the relation, while they perform their tasks. We may navigate through and beyond the European and Western tradition, of course, and observe variations of this relational conception of subjectivity across the world – for instance, in the Jewish tradition as it converged in Martin Buber's philosophy of *Ich und Du,* or in the relational self established by the Confucian notion of *ren*, humanhood, or in the main tenets of Ubuntu philosophy, or in the conception of subjectivity as "place" that belongs to Japanese philosophy – all of which highlight the seminal relation between the individual and the other as constitutive of the world. (Incidentally, I would encourage all young students to look wider than your own tradition, and think of philosophy as a set of cross-cultural concepts to be singled out.)

This may sound very abstract – and it probably is. Yet, the basic intuition of all these theories is simply that there is no other source of

learning, comprehension, and self-education than the conceptual and cultural network in which we are involved since our birth. There is no world, no personality, not even one's fundamental experience – no *Lebenswelt* before the relation – that literally creates our world.

What I would like to stress here is that human relations take place in the pragmatic sphere of a common experience. We live in a relational matrix that shapes and affects our own experience, down to our basic perceptive evidence. Interaction, though, is a task. It admits no passivity. Interaction, or exchange, implies an effort to take our experiences to a degree of universality that makes it possible for them to be shared in common. It means therefore understanding their indefinite, possible effects and causes, from the deepest cultural heritage to the utmost individual and personal psychological sense. Learning to be human in a relational world means to deploy all possible efforts to make our private, local, cultural determinations available to our interlocutors, and not to use them as tools to resist potential external interferences.

When this capacity of looking at our experience from a plurality of different standpoints is lost, we face a simplification of the world whose effects on human coexistence are ruinous. The incapacity to rise beyond the particularity of our immediate experience, to universalize it in such a way as to take it onto a level of universality to allow it to interact with others' experiences, necessarily leads to a clash of experiences, to opposing one's particular finitude to other particular finitudes. The other is reduced to a projection of our mind, not anymore perceived in his or in her human complexity, but reduced to a *character [personage]*, to some of its characteristics that, in our view, define it in its whole totality.

It is precisely this reduction of the person to some arbitrary figures, or stereotypes, that forms the root of epistemic violence. In a seminal essay written in 1947, and soberly entitled "The Stranger", Alfred Schutz depicts this attitude: the reduction of a person, a group, a set of attitudes and behaviors, to the conceptual schemes and categories of another group. The image that an individual, or more often a group, forms of another individual or group does not stem from a desire to establish an exchange with that individual or group of individuals, but rather from the will to own it by reducing it to characters that satisfy certain needs of the interpreter[1]. The other is not conceived as an other with equal dignity, as a partner in our shared human path, but as an object to be taken advantage of. To say in technical terms, the transcendental process of meaning constitution of group B is reduced, obliterated, annihilated, according to the exigencies of the process of meaning formation of group A.

This instrumental reduction of the other to a tool for our needs is the tragic process of dehumanization of our time. We may describe it here, in this comfortable room – or we may go out and see it in the battlefields of Ypres, Verdun, and so many other ones; in the mud of Idomeni; in the camps of Calais, Lesbos, and Lampedusa; in the floating boats of the Rohingya people, wretched for not belonging to any wider tribe, or nation; in the walls, barriers, and barbed wires intended to leave out the derelict and outcasts of the world,

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1. The key idea here is that "the ready-made picture of the foreign group subsisting within the stranger's home-group proves its inadequacy for the approaching stranger for the mere reason that it has not been formed with the aim of provoking a response or a reaction from the members of the foreign group" (Schutz 1976: 98).

the migrants, the refugees, the homeless people on whom our societies throw their resentment, exactly like they did, not many decades ago, on other human beings who were just "Jews"… Built on the ideal of human rights and dignity, European society is now acting out a conflict that shapes its entire history: on the one hand, the sacred nature of *caritas*, the universal principle of human fraternity and its secular offspring, human rights; on the other hand, a century after the battles of the Great War, an old, tribal sentiment that excludes and discriminates all those who do not share the same blood and the same land.

Is there an alternative attitude to be adopted? There is, and it belongs to the long-standing history of our civilization. If, instead of projecting our immediate experiences upon the other, we make an effort to transform them in such a way that they can be transformed, then, Schutz writes, "that which formerly was a strange fact and a puzzling problem to our mind is transformed into an additional element of our warranted experience. We have enlarged and adjusted our stock of experiences" (1976: 105). Or, to borrow the words of a prominent pragmatist philosopher, CI Lewis, we have expanded the boundaries of our experience.

Yet, as the French philosopher Éric Weil pointed out, the choice between violence and discourse precedes the discourse. Interaction requires more than a working set of epistemic structures – it primarily involves our deepest attitudes and feelings – our will. When we talk of interaction, individual or cultural, we must be ready to change ourselves. We have to put on the balance our habits and behaviors, overcome compulsions and desires, force the empirical subjects that we are, individual as well as cultural, to question our concrete form, our configuration and what we perceive as our 'self' – as our identity. It is a painful process that may require us to take hold of our own *flesh*, to reconsider beliefs as well as long-lasting convictions in order to be prepared to fecundate our souls with the vital blow of an external pneuma… be prepared for a *conversion* that may turn us into radically different creatures, exactly like Saul of Tarsus, or Plato's cave dwellers, or The Matrix hero Neo who deliberately chose the red pill over the blue one.

The process of civilization is a process of self-plasticity, a permanent self-shaping that makes it possible for each of us to open him/herself to the stranger, understanding and integrating the odd, the weird, the queer into his/her own world, and thus building his/her own complex self. Without that capacity to change, without this *generosity* which is not simply a moral feature but a basic epistemic mechanism, no interaction can be possible: there will only be a clash of experiences, a conflict of specific identities tragically and desperately clinging to their original determinations. Without interaction, and without the generosity that makes it possible, no human person can be built; by escaping this process of permanent elaboration of one's self, one is self-condemned to oblivion and nothingness, because personality is the product of a permanent exchange, interaction, and mutual transformation:

The undiscerning life that made them foul, to all recognition now makes them dim (Inf. vii, 53-54).
La sconoscente vita che li fé sozzi / ad ogne conoscenza or li fa bruni (Inf. vii, 53-54).

Such is the fate of the avaricious, lost into hell in Dante's *Comedy*. Those who refuse to interact with the external world, who refuse to change, to

give out any part of themselves, who cling to their determinations and finitude, are unable to construct themselves as human beings, and betray the potentialities of human life. They live a blind life, and by lack of interaction are incapable of building themselves. They fail to be fully human, and remain anonymous, indistinct figures to the poet's eyes, deprived of all identity, dim to all recognition after having been fouled, in their earthly existence, by their undiscerning life.

This capacity of transforming one's theoretical mindset, this generosity as a basic epistemic device has been described in modern and contemporary culture through the classic notions of charity, generosity, and fraternity – an old concept that is raising a growing interest lately. The formal nature of these moral notions has been conceptualized throughout the history of human cultures under the shape of a formal principle constitutive of moral behavior, known as the *golden rule*. In its essential formulation due to 17th century Benjamin Camfield, "do as you would be done by", the rule is a formal apriori of the moral world – what Charles Morris would have called its "formative ascriptor". It does not carry any substantial content into an already constituted moral world: on the contrary, it establishes the moral world through the crucial idea of a devotion to the other. In this way, it is left to the individual's autonomous decision to choose the most appropriate behavior every time. Morality is here constituted as a formal field where the decision of the individual is to be made, each time, according to the context and the purposes to be realized.

A contemporary theorist of charity, as Donald Davidson is regarded to be, seems aware of the depth of the problem. In his paper "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", he brought the principle of charity beyond the level of single beliefs, and applied it to conceptual frameworks in general: "When others think differently from us, no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts" (2001b: 197)[2].

The point is how can charity or benevolence reveal themselves as useful in accepting not only the others' statements, but also the others' behaviors and attitudes. In what way can this principle help us consider our differently educated neighbor as somebody with whom we can mutually exchange and share common patterns of behavior, rather than a weird guy who insists on pushing inappropriate behaviors onto a public space that we consider as our exclusive home, our own and sovereign space of interaction? This is not a theoretical dilemma. It pervades our daily, pragmatic life. How can we oppose the growing rejection of people dressing differently, voicing differently, sitting differently, eating differently…? The growing public difficulty of conceiving integration, which we witness in our daily experience, requires more than a set of mere logical assumptions. Charity goes far beyond the mere logical dimension of human coexistence; it affects the fundamental sphere of our immediate feelings and emotions.

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2. The principle of charity, as conceived by Neil Wilson (1959), Willard Quine (1959) and David Davidson (1973, 2001a, 2001b), is an epistemic rejection of cultural relativism. In Davidson's formulation (2001a: 148) it "directs the interpreter to translate or to interpret so as to read some of his own standards of truth into the pattern of sentences held true by the speaker". In other terms, it introduces a commitment: we postulate that our counterpart's statements are true according to our own criteria and, starting from this assumption, we are led to make an effort to explain (or clarify) any eventual oddity we find in it.

If attitudes and feelings are a priori of philosophical discourse, they nonetheless are a posteriori of cultural discourses. It is also in teaching us to think of ourselves as beings in a relational context, instead of as sovereign subjects, that philosophy can influence our deepest self, where our feelings, impulses and attitudes are formed. Learning to be human is learning to establish a complex relation to our experience. The awareness of that complexity, and the principle of responsibility that it carries with it, contain the *duty* to understand and take into account the different facets that confront our experience on a daily basis. Once we understand why we behave in a certain way, why certain habits, beliefs, and attitudes are embedded in our natural way of being, once we understand why our fundamental and most natural experience is structured in a certain way, it might become easier for us to us to conceive other forms of natural attitude, other *Lebenswelte*, as potential parts of our own self.

Thus philosophy as a theory of the structures of knowledge accomplishes its purpose of *paideia* or *Bildung*, widening the boundaries of our self, educating our attitudes and feelings, educating our personality to generosity – a true education of our feelings, a sentimental education. Thank you.

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