

Contesting evil – developing theological understanding of resistance

Inadequate language

We have studied dimensions of the tragedy of July 22th. The perpetrator who killed so many young and adults, terminating so many hopes is still alive, now complaining of trifles in the prison. This is evil. How shall we address evil, find the right language, the adequate concepts to resist? How to think about the unthinkable?

Hannah Arendt points to experiences that are too heavy to grasp. It is hard for people, she states, to live with something that takes your breath and leaves you without words. Then you can be tempted to put your lack of adequate words into *other* constructions of language. She sees the *language of feelings* as a resort people take refuge to, when adequate words fail. “The whole atmosphere where /evil/ is discussed nowadays is by referring to *feelings* – often of no great format, and whoever addresses such questions – if they are discussed at all, will be sucked down to this low level, where you are not able to discuss this seriously.”¹ She wanted more *rational* language and thinking and to see the moral as a *responsibility* for the individual. So when we are at loss of adequate words, we experience a question worthwhile to consider: what sort of language can we use to describe evil, and protest against it?

Arendt does not only talk of the language we can use over against evil. She also states that the philosophical tradition demonstrates certain innocence to evil, even avoids it. “We have the most shocking confusion coming from attempts to avoid, to evade, to explain away human evil. When we look into the moral tradition from Sokrates to Kant until now (with exemption for religious tradition) we see that they agree on one point, and that it is impossible for human kind intentionally to do bad things, to do evil for evil’s sake.”²

She thinks *literature* makes it better: Shakespeare, Melville and Dostoevsky *do* present evildoers.³ But the real evil is still something different, she underlines, taking departure in an observation by Nietzsche: According to Nietzsche even the man who contempt himself, will respect that part of himself who despises! But the real evil is that which puts us in speechless

¹ “die ganze Atmosphäre, in der die Dinge heutzutage diskutiert werden, ist mit Gefühlen, oft nicht gerade grossen Formats, aufgeladen, und wer immer diese Frage anspricht, muss damit rechnen, wenn überhaupt noch möglich auf ein Niveau heruntergezogen zu werden, auf dem ernsthaft nicht mehr diskutiert werden kann.” Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 19. Arendt also remarks that Eichmann used such emotional language – to his own misery. He remembered often only his feelings, not the facts during his trial in Jerusalem. This led to that nobody believed that he cooperated with the Zionists and saved many lives of Jews in his period as SS leader of Jewish emigration in Vienna the late 30ties, cfr. *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*, Pieper, München 1986, 134-142, especially 141f.

² “Schliesslich ist da die Verwirrung, die am meisten schockiert.: die Umgehung, das Ausweichen vor oder Wegerklären der menschlichen Schlechtigkeit. Wenn sich die Tradition der Moralphilosophie von Sokrates bis Kant und... bis heute (im Unterschied zur Tradition religiösen Denkens) in einem Punkt einig ist, dann darin, dass für den Menschen unmöglich ist, vorsätzlich schlechte Dinge zu tun, das Böse um des Bösen willen zu wollen.” Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 42.

³ Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 44.

shock when we cannot say anything but: *this should never have happened*.”⁴ Her statement has become famous: we are at loss of words against the real evil, can only say: this should not have happened.

The Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie has said something along the same lines. He considers punishment adequate in cases where the law can prevent unwanted behavior, like in traffic offenses. But in serious cases like murder, punishment cannot compensate for the loss of life and for the tragedy. We should in the most grave cases perhaps arrange a court trial, he proposed in a seminar discussion some years ago, and then, after having considered gravely the offence and circumstances, ending up declaring solemnly, not the just desert as anyone familiar with the tradition of general prevention, but only a *word* of reproach: “fy!” (The Norwegian word for ‘shame on you’).

Maybe we can go into the field of scrutinizing evil, seeing how *fragile* our life is? We take the everyday in peace for granted, as long as possible. But when we reconsider, we are inevitably exposed to dangers. This situation is in itself however far from evil. The fragility makes us vulnerable for evil, but is in itself one of the moving dimensions of human life.

Martha Nussbaum opens *The Fragility of goodness* with the wise remark: “... part of the peculiar beauty of *human* existence just *is* its vulnerability.”⁵ In the Greek philosophical tradition, the interest is focused on the fragility of human existence, and what possible means this weak creature has to maintain life and dignity.

Asking along these lines, I could not avoid going into Hanna Arendt’s studies on evil. The 20th Century was full of disasters. We command a deep and broad knowledge on calamities, such as how the First World War came about and how this led into the Second. To read about these events give startling experiences.

The Second World War did not even end with the collapse of Germany and Japan. The terror continued many years after 1945.⁶ But only to describe the atrocities that happened to the young generation, born at the end of the 19th Century, and then the terrible Russian revolution, and further the building up of European fascism in the 1920ties and thirties, and so the Second World War, which did not even come to a halt in 1945, will perhaps not bring us the tools to understand evil. Delving with atrocities does not necessarily give us *understanding* of evil, but certainly a background for understanding.

I find it illuminating to go into Arendt’s work. She was experienced with this terrible history, first in Germany from 1933, becoming a refugee in France, and then to the US. After

⁴ “Nach Nietzsche respektiert der Mann, der sich selbst verachtet, zumindest denjenigen in ihm, der verachtet! Doch das wirklich Böse ist das, was bei uns sprachloses Entsetzten verursacht, wenn wir nichts anderes mehr zu sagen können als: Dies hätte nie geschehen dürfen.” Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 45.

⁵ “jene Fragen, die individuelles Betragen und Verhalten betreffen, die wenigen Regeln und Normen, aufgrund derer Menschen gewöhnlich Recht und Unrecht unterscheiden... und die für jede normale Person entweder als Teil göttlichen oder natürlichen Gesetzes selbstverständlich gültig waren.” Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of goodness. Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, 2.

⁶ See the broad report in Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent. Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, St. Martin’s Press, New York 2012.

sociological and philosophical studies and teaching in the US, she went to Jerusalem, trying to understand what happened during the trial of Adolf Eichmann. She wrote about the trial and she listened to the proceedings of the process in Jerusalem and presented much more material and reflections than usually was reported at that time in the international press, and she also organized her thoughts on evil, in lectures on Ethical Questions, later. This will be my way to go into the theme of evil.

Natural law- totally change of rules 1933

In her lectures from 1965 on "Some Questions on Moral Philosophy" Hannah Arendt discussed "the questions on how individuals reacted and behaved (after the Nazi takeover) and how the few rules and norms where people ordinarily distinguish between right and wrong, *changed*, rules building upon either divine or human law who were for every normal human being self-evident and valid."⁷ She stated that ordinary people are able to make such distinctions between justice and injustice without further notice, and this is regarded as common.

She wondered how it came about that her own people (the Germans) in spite of their heavy tradition of moral thinking and modern development of industry and commerce, a well-organized society, changed moral, almost from one day to the next: "until all this collapsed overnight, without any clear early warning, as the situation occurred, as *moral* in original sense as 'mores' as customs and manners, suddenly and unexpectedly could easily be replaced for individuals and for the entire people – with *another moral* as it were table manners"⁸ How came it about that her people changed moral obligations overnight in 1933?

For moral philosophy and for theology, such sudden changes are enigmatic. It took only few months in 1933 to isolate non-Arian people. They lost their jobs, were robbed for their property and subsequently killed – or only robbed and expelled, until 1941. The regime was brutal and the people kept docile by force.⁹ Still, this deep change in morality, order and respect are still important to consider in a situation where deep changes evidently were at stage. Arendt also refers to Winston Churchill, who remarked on the fundamental changes he had experienced, facing the terror in Germany: "Scarcely anything, material or abstract, which I was brought up to believe was permanent and vital, has lasted. Everything I was sure, or taught to be sure, was impossible, has happened."¹⁰

These observations contrast to the moral tradition, where *thinking* since Aristoteles usually starts with the *good* as the outset, evil is an obstacle, even a mystery.¹¹ Discourses on evil, held by most moral philosophers through the ages, normally state that the moral good is self-

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Über das Böse. Eine Vorlesung zu Fragen der Ethik*, Piper, München Zürich 2013, 10.

⁸ "bis all dies ohne grosse Vorwarnung über Nacht zusammenbrach, als die Situation eintrat, dass die Moral plötzlich ohne Hüllen im ursprünglichen Sinn des Wortes dastand als ein Kanon von 'mores', Sitten und Manieren nämlich, der gegen einen anderen ausgetauscht werden konnte, ohne dass das mehr Mühe gekostet hätte, als die Tischmanieren eines Einzelnen oder eines ganzes Volkes zu verändern." Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 10f.

⁹ I have described and discussed these changes in a contemporary perspective in my recent article "Enighet som konfliktskaper" (Concordance as Generator of Conflicts), *Kirke og Kultur*, Universitetsforlaget Oslo 2015, 73-86.

¹⁰ Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 10.

¹¹ Nicomatic Ethichs, Book I,1. Evil is not framed, just discussed as different sorts of inappropriate behaviour, Book VII,1.

evident, and that distinguishing between right and wrong is absolute, and every sound person is able to see this without any education.¹²

Arendt leans to Socrates' saying that it is better to suffer injustice than to do injustice. – But these insights have not stood up to the storm of our time, she also remarks looking back on the recent wars.¹³ Moral philosophy has moved into new ground after the disasters in Nazi-Germany causing 15 millions of deaths and Stalin's grim Soviet Union, where 27 million people lost their lives in the atrocities war.

She also maintains that moral sentences are axiomatic; they are self-evident, not possible to prove.¹⁴ So in the field of moral actions, we are left with our best, intuitive knowledge, or reflections on the common good, but hardly any strong proofs of just and unjust, right and wrong.

The theologian Karl Barth worked intensely with the contemporary question of evil, but can also make a shortcut: Do as the Huguenots in prison. They inscribed on the prison walls: *résistez!* Perhaps we rather should start with how to *deal with* evil rather than trying to *understand* evil?

Arendt takes interest in Socrates' way of thinking, when perceiving evil, and this can bring us further. Socrates in *Gorgias* accepts that his arguments may not convince his opponents, but he states that his opponent Kallikles will never come to terms with himself, but for ever contradict himself. Socrates on his part will rather die than contradict himself. Socrates opens the reflections, seeing the subject's relation to himself and the fundamental importance *to be in concordance with the own self*: ("I at least, will insist that I'd rather had my lyra to be out of tune or sound falsely or likewise that a choir I should direct were out of tune, or that most people rather should not agree with me or protest against me, than that I should not to be in accord with myself and subsequently contradict myself."¹⁵) The central thought here is that Socrates finds himself as a *subject*, together and in dialogue with his own self, and will stay in concordant relation at *all* costs.¹⁶

This doubling of the thinking of the subject has moral consequences for Socrates and for his understanding of morality. Everyone is stuck with him-or herself, as one-in-two. One can be in disaccord with oneself. If I am in disaccord with another person, I could leave. But I cannot leave myself. Therefore it is recommended to be in accordance with myself, before I take another person's opinion in regard.

This is the deep reason for Socrates' advice: better to suffer injustice, than to cause injustice – for in the last case, I'll stay in disaccord with myself forever. That is not pleasant: "when I do

¹² Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 47.

¹³ Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 48.

¹⁴ Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 50.

¹⁵ "Und ich wenigstens... bin der Meinung, dass lieber auch meine Lyra verstimmt sein und misstönen möge oder ein Chor, den ich anzuführen hätte, und die meisten Menschen nicht mit mir einstimmen, sondern mir widersprechen mögen, als dass ich allein mit mir selbst nicht zusammenstimmen, sondern mir widersprechen müsste." *Gorgias* 482c-d, Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 70.

¹⁶ Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 70, note 29, where Arendt points to the phrase in greek: *eme emauto*, which Schleiermacher renders like this: *ich allein mit mir selbst*.

injustice, I condemn myself to live in unbearable intimacy with a perpetrator; I cannot get rid of him... So, as I am my partner when I think, I'll be my partner when I act. I know the offender and will be condemned to live with him."¹⁷ *This* and only this is for him unbearable, and has nothing to do with what other people or gods for that sake, state or think they see.

The inner dialogue

So such open communication with oneself is the adequate way to understand why to resist evil: „When you are divided from yourself, it is like you have to live and continuously communicate with your own enemy. Nobody would want that. If you do evil, you will live with a perpetrator. And even when many would prefer to take advantage of doing evil rather than to suffer evil, they would scarcely want to live with a thief, a murderer or a liar. That is what they forget who praises tyrants, those who have come to power through murder and deceit."¹⁸ So here is the human *language*, that makes it possible to live in an *open communication* with oneself, this is the quality of the human being, and the source of moral choice „If it is the ability to language that differentiates human beings from other animals – and that was what the Greeks believed in fact, and what Aristoteles later proposed in his famous definition of the human kind – *then* it is through this silent dialogue I have with myself, that my humanity will be confirmed."¹⁹

If we presuppose that there could be an intact, open, honest communication with oneself, this line of thought will be a good support to resist evil, in oneself – and also teach others to follow the same path. Arendt describes however very well how this could *not* be the case. She followed and gave report of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem 1961, who was a technician behind the Holocaust.

Eichmann talked endlessly through the interrogations and admitted all the facts that he remembered from the planning and organizing of the Holocaust. But in his own view, he acted as an honest and dutiful public servant. Arendt tries to understand his attitude. She dismisses that he was a case of pathological untruthfulness combined with endless stupidity, and neither was he a case of criminal obduracy.

Delusion

No, she says, Eichmann constructed his self- understanding in line with all his contemporary Germans. “Everyone had been adjusted to the habit of deceiving themselves, because this was a sort of precondition to survive. This habit has been prolonged until now, so that, after 18 years since the Nazi-regime collapsed, the content of these lies are as good as forgotten – it is often difficult not to have the opinion that lies and self-deceptions are integral parts of the

¹⁷ “wenn ich Unrecht tue, bin ich dazu verdammt, in unerträglicher Intimität mit einem Unrechttuenden zusammenzuleben; ich kann ihn nie loswerden... So wie ich mein Partner bin, wenn ich denke, bin ich mein eigener Zeuge, wenn ich handle. Ich kenne den Täter und bin verdammt, mit ihm zusammenzuleben.” Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 70f.

¹⁸ “Wenn Sie mit Ihrem Selbst uneins sind, ist das so, als wenn Sie gezwungen wären, mit Ihrem eigenen Feind zu leben und kommunizieren. Das kann sich keiner wünschen. Wenn Sie Übles tun, leben Sie mit einem Übeltäter zusammen, und wenn auch Viele es vorziehen, zu ihrem eigenen Vorteil eher Schlechtes zu tun, als Schlechtes zu erleiden, wird niemand gerne mit einem Dieb oder einem Mörder oder einem Lügner zusammenleben wollen. Das ist es, was diejenigen vergessen, die den Tyrannen, welcher durch Mord und Betrug an die Macht gekommen ist, preisen.” Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 71f.

¹⁹ “Wenn die Fähigkeit der Sprache den Menschen von anderen Tiergattungen unterscheidet – und das ist es, was die Griechen tatsächlich glaubten und was Aristoteles in seiner berühmten Definition des Menschen später ausdrückte –, dann ist es dieser stummen Dialog, den ich mit mir selbst führe, in welchem meine spezifisch menschliche Eigenschaft bestätigt wird.” Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 73.

national character of Germans.”²⁰ Arendt describes how Eichmann is fully convinced to have acted in accordance to his own conscience and followed orders as a responsible public servant. He could forget about many important facts from the history of Holocaust, but remembered well the phrases that he had consoled himself with, during his – by common standards – incomprehensible brutal daily work. “Important is that he has not forgotten a single of the phrases by which he consoled himself and which gave him an ‘uplifting sentiment’ in one or other situation. When the judges in cross-examination tried to speak to his conscience, he played these ‘uplifting sentiments’ back to them, and it shocked and confused them as they realized that the defendant always had ready a special uplifting cliché for every period of his life and for every activity he had exercised.”²¹

So even if every human person has a constant inner dialogue, there is no guarantee that the outcome of this conversation will end up in the rational way Socrates had in mind. As Nietzsche has pointed out: the inner dialogue can ‘rewrite’ what happens: “This I did says my memory. I cannot have done this, says my pride, and does not give in. At last, the memory gives in.”²²

It is also troubling to see that the mass-murderers of the war could be rather sympathetic people. Arendt remarks that they could be devoted family father with intellectual interests. “Let me remind you that the murderers in the Third Reich did not only led exemplary family life but also used their time off reading Hölderlin and listened to Bach – and then proved that intellectuals can be drawn into crime just as any other.”²³ In a more recent study, Harald Welzer studies how just ordinary people were able to change into mass murderers. He points to the *community* which made these mental changes possible and subsisted individual judgment:²⁴

Arendt brings just this point further, and considers the individual’s relation to society and to him-or herself. She asks whether the calamity could be better understood, when we

²⁰ “Allen aber war zur Gewohnheit geworden, sich selbst zu betrügen, weil dies eine Art moralischer Voraussetzung zum Überleben geworden war; und diese Gewohnheit hat sich so fortgesetzt, dass es heute noch, 18 Jahre nach dem Zusammenbruch des Naziregimes, wo doch der spezifische Gehalt jener Lügen so gut wie vergessen ist, manchmal schwerfällt, nicht zu meinen, dass Verlogenheit und Lebenslüge zum integrierende Bestandteil des deutschen Nationalcharakters gehören.” Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*, Piper, München Zürich 2013, 129.

²¹ “Wesentlich ist, dass er sich nicht eine einzige der Phrasen vergessen hatte, die ihm in der einen oder anderen Situation ein ‘erhebendes Gefühl’ verschafft hatten. Wenn die Richter im Kreuzverhör versuchten, sein Gewissen anzusprechen, tönten ihnen diese ‘erhebende Gefühle’ entgegen, und es entsetzte sie, ebenso wie es sie verwirrte, als sie entdeckten, dass der Angeklagte ein spezielles erhebendes Klischee für jeden Abschnitt seines Lebens und für jede Tätigkeiten, die er ausgeübt hatte, parat hatte.”²¹ He didn’t catch the discrepancies between the realities he experienced and the “map” he followed by leaning on the clichés he clung to. he was rather content “und merkte überhaupt nicht, dass da so etwas wie eine ‘Inkonsequenz’ zutage trat. Wir werden sehen, dass diese schaurige Begabung, sich mit Klischees zu trösten, ihn auch in der Stunde seines Todes nicht verliess.” Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 133.

²² “This I did says my memory. I cannot have done this, says my pride, and does not give in. At last, the memory gives in.” Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 120, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Viertes Hauptstück, Sprüche und Zwischenspiele, § 68.

²³ “Lassen sie mich abschliessend an jene Mörder im Dritten Reich erinnern, die nicht nur mustergültiges Familienleben führten, sondern auch ihre Freizeit gerne damit verbrachten, Hölderlin zu lesen und Bach zu hören, und damit bewiesen..., dass Intellektuelle ebenso einfach in Verbrechen hineingezogen werden können wie jeder Andere auch.” Arendt, *Über das Böse*,

²⁴ “es ist.. für die Analyse von Täterhandeln deswegen von Bedeutung, weil die Entscheidungen für das eigene Handeln nicht rein situativ und individuell getroffen werden, sondern immer auch an diesen grösseren Rahmen gebunden sind – in dem Sinne etwa, dass die wahrgenommene Legitimität einer Judenerschliessung durch einen gesellschaftlich dominanten Antisemitismus und Rassismus... kontextualisiert ist.” Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2005, 16.

investigate the human gifts to remember and think? – She observes that the culprits seemed to miss such gifts.²⁵

To think alone

She then goes into the deeper structure of Socrates' thoughts on justice and injustice. Criterion for judging what is just or unjust is not the communal habits or conventions, she states, but at the end *what I decide for myself*. And this again depends on *thinking*. She investigates the premises for thinking: One must be *alone* to perform the inner dialogue which is thinking, and that is more than to be conscientious or experience oneself. "This to-live-with myself is more than self-perception which always will follow me in all I do and in every condition I am. To be with myself and to judge for myself, is articulated and comes to shape in the processes of *thinking*. And every process of thinking is an activity where I talk with myself about what I just now concentrate on."²⁶ This requires being *alone*. To be able to think, I must be alone with myself. In community, however, something different happens. Then I will be a *single* subject, not a *subject in inner dialogue with myself*. This difference is important, and should be considered with its wide implications, Arendt states. This alone-ness has also quite revolutionary consequences, as Socrates so clearly demonstrated.

Let now me start with the phenomenon of being alone. Thinking can easily be interrupted, Arendt remarks: "When someone turns to me, I will have to respond to him and not to myself. And when I do so, I change. I become *One* who of course is self-conscious, that means has self-perception, meaning consciousness, but who no longer will be responsive *to my inner self*." Of course is it possible to open up for a dialogue with a person close to me, and so think together. But that sort of intimate exchange is at the same time something quite different from being in inner dialogue with myself.

The point is to comprehend what it takes to be alone and in dialogue with myself – and what this condition brings, different from other relations and situations. When I talk to another, I am not any more *two* with myself, but *one*: "When in my solitude my process of thinking comes to still stand – I will be reduced again to be only *One*."²⁷ The reason for this change of condition may be that someone talks to me, or I start to do something, or I am simply tired – the result being that I will be *One*, and not *Two in inner dialogue*. The statesman from antiquity, Cato said: "I am never more active when I do nothing, and I am never less alone as when I am together with myself"²⁸ The loneliness that gives space for inner dialogue is utterly creative.

²⁵ Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 80.

²⁶ "Dieses Mit-mir selbst-Zusammenleben ist mehr als die Selbst-Wahrnehmung, die mich bei allem, was ich tue, und in jedem Zustand, in dem ich mich befinde, begleitet. Mit mir selbst zu sein und selbst zu urteilen wird in dem Prozessen des Denkens artikuliert und aktualisiert, und jeder Denkprozess ist eine Tätigkeit, bei der ich mit mir selbst über das spreche, was immer mich gerade angeht." Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 81.

²⁷ "Wenn ... in der Einsamkeit mein Denkprozess aus irgendeinem Grund zu Stillstand kommt, werde ich wieder *Einer*." Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 82.

²⁸ "Niemals bin ich tätiger, als wenn ich nichts tue; niemals bin ich weniger allein, als wenn ich mit mir selbst zusammen bin." Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 84 – the quotation comes from Cicero, and the sentence is stated by Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, see page 84, note 33.

What she points at with these comments which by first glance can seem paradoxical, is that it is an open human possibility to shape a distance to society, to common conventions and to common rules and critically consider whether they are valid. The basis for doing this is to be anchored in oneself, be thinking in the inner dialogue mentioned, rooted in the remembered history. So therefore, Socrates could say things like: it is better to suffer injustice than to cause injustice. It is better to live intimate with an open-minded self than to despise oneself, in the ongoing inner dialogue. "This is only valid for those who are beings who think, those who need their own company in order to be able to think."²⁹

Rooted in memory and own thoughts – give limitations for action

Here is the valuable source to understand the right limitations of life, and to understand the basic morality that neither the community nor the individual can allow themselves to trespass their own limitations. "When a person is a being who thinks, who is rooted in his thoughts and his memory, and then knows well that he has to live with himself, he will realize that there are limits to what he can allow himself to do." And here she can come close to define evil. The thinking person does not meet these boundaries from outside, but *has to draw them herself*, she states. "These limits can change in a remarkable and uncomfortable way, from person to person, from country to country, from century to century, but the limitless, extreme evil is only possible where these roots in the remembered history are lost. These roots and the reflection on them are missing when people only glide over the surface of the events and allow themselves to be carried away by the events without trying to grasp the implications of events – which they very possibly were able to grasp."³⁰

Here we see how Arendt's way of thinking go in a certain way parallel with that of Karl Barth, who investigates the evil as "Nichtiges" emptiness, limitlessness, stupidity, inertia, alien to critical thought an investigation. Arendt at her side, also remarks that evil in view of the inner dialogue remains "formal" and "without content".³¹

The deepest human tragedy is to lose the ability to connect to oneself in inner dialogue, because there is the source of creativity and ultimate measure for how to deal with others. In a way, this philosophical insight concurs with religious thinking, Arendt proposes. The deepest, hidden crime is to lose this ability that constitutes the human person, Arendt finds by Socrates: "to lose this ability, to lose the loneliness and then the creativity, with other words: to lose the self that constitutes the person." This loss is in a way the "crank" that moral investigation revolves around and a revelation of the inner meaning of evil in human life, revealing

²⁹ "Die Gültigkeit lässt sich deshalb nur für den Menschen behaupten, insofern er ein denkendes Wesen ist, das wegen des Denkprozesses sich selbst als Gesellschaft benötigt. Nichts von dem gilt für die Verlassenheit und die Isoliertheit." Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 85.

³⁰ "Wenn /eine Person/ ein denkendes Wesen ist, das in seinen Gedanken und Erinnerungen wurzelt und also weiss, dass sie mit sich selbst zu leben hat, wird es Grenzen geben zu dem, was sie sich selbst zu tun erlauben kann." - "Diese Grenzen können sich in beachtlicher und unbequemer Weise von Person zu Person, von Land zu Land, von Jahrhundert zu Jahrhundert ändern; doch das grenzenlose, extreme Böse ist nur dort möglich, wo diese selbst-geschlagenen und gewachsenen Wurzeln, die automatisch Möglichkeiten einschränken, ganz und gar fehlen. Sie fehlen dort, wo Menschen nur über die Oberfläche von Ereignissen dahingleiten, wo sie sich gestatten, davongetragen zu werden, ohne je in irgendeine Tiefe, derer sie fähig sein mögen, einzudringen." Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 86.

³¹ Arendt, *Über das Böse*, 96.

closeness to religious thought. “the ultimate measure for behavior towards others lies always in the own self, not only in strictly philosophical but also in religious thinking.”³²

For political reasons to recur to the individual dialogue with the self, is only then required, when the “common morality” is not sustainable any more. This was the extreme that happened in 1933. The non-Arians were expelled from the normal society, lost their jobs, their respect, were marginalized. After few weeks, they were almost invisible. Common standards towards these groups were acquitted, by propaganda, by new laws, by coercion. Normality was left, emergency introduced. “Here follows that the Socratic morality is only relevant in times of crisis and that the self as criterion for moral action is a sort of exception.” She combines this observation with the critical remark that people, who in peaceful times, without any danger, present high-flying moral norms, are off pist: “Those who under perfect normal circumstances call on soaring moral norms, resemble those who claim God’s name in vain.”³³ In her view, there are times when you must oppose convention, other times when that sort of resistance is only pitiful.

Evil is seen as more of lacking presence in one’s own life, and a sort of avoiding the evident tasks, open for sight. This is a prelude to go into a theological way of discussing the same theme. I will start to describe some basic elements in Karl Barth’s construction, in his creation theology, volume III of his Church Dogmatic. It is here we also find his most elaborate discussion on evil.

Barth, Erhaltung Nichtiges

Barth uses here the concept “Nichtiges”. This he sees in the context of the act of creation, understood as an act of distinguishing between what God *wanted* from what he did *not* choose.³⁴ There is another distinction that makes understanding even more tricky. Barth writes of the *good* shadow side of creation as well. There are limitations for life, in size, in length and to space. These limitations are not evil, but limitations to mostly benefit life itself. But, he says, these shadows are also like a hiding place for evil, an alibi, and then the risk is there not to detect its sinister work.³⁵

So this evil, Nichtiges, is that what God has not chosen, the chaos God left when he created. Therefore this entity has a certain negativity. But it is not only nothing, Nichts. It has a sort of

³² “Doch wenn wir /Socrates/ hierin folgen und ihn dann fragen, was die Sanktionen für jenes berühmte, den Augen der Götter und Menschen verborgene Verbrechen sein würden, hätte er in seiner Antwort nur sagen können; der Verlust dieser Fähigkeit, der Verlust der Einsamkeit und... damit der Verlust der Kreativität – mit anderen Worten: der Verlust des Selbst, das die Person ausmacht.”... “..Das letzte Mass für das Verhalten gegenüber Anderen /ist/ immer das Selbst gewesen, nicht nur in strenggenommen philosophischen, sondern auch im religiösen Denken.” Arendt, Über das Böse, 87.

³³ “Woraus folgt, dass die Sokratische Moralität politisch nur in Krisenzeiten relevant ist und dass das Selbst als Kriterium moralischen Verhaltens politisch eine Art von Ausnahme-Mass darstellt.” - “Doch jene, die unter vollkommen normalen Bedingungen hochfliegende moralische Normen anrufen, ähneln denen stark, die den Namen Gottes vergeblich in Anspruch nehmen.” Arendt, Über das Böse, 91 cfr. 94.

³⁴ KD III/3 83.

³⁵ “das Nichtige... in seiner Wirklichkeit unerkannt bleibt und um so ungescheuter und ungehemmter sein gefährliches, sein verderbliches Wesen treiben darf.” KD III/3 339

peculiar reality, insofar that *God is against it*.³⁶ So Barth avoids the traditional critique that God is “behind” evil and therefore needs theological defence, theodizé. On the contrary, Barth states, God is not at all behind evil, he is categorically against it, has not chosen it in the act of creation, but he gives evil its existence, when being against it. But, this act gives Nichtiges is peculiar existence and room for activity. This bold stroke also underlines that in resisting evil, humankind is allied with God.

Hope and responsibility

The construction carries also hope. Evil exists for so long as God is still fighting evil. The overwhelming burden of evil is in the long turn not for humankind to destruct. That is in God’s hand. In the meantime, the right and hopeful attitude is *resistance*. There is nothing to find in evil itself, it is only chaotic, something unwanted, as sort of active emptiness, chaos.

Within this framework, the responsibility is limited for every one of us. With this same limitation, everyone may take responsibility within own resources and possibilities. And in doing this, partake in the bigger picture of all creation. At the end, with the limited means you and I command, we partake in our place, what comes out of the whole creation. Barth uses a pars pro toto- perspective, that respects the limitations of every single life and underlines that this does not limit that *everyone has responsibility* in her and his own place.³⁷

This is a major point in Barth’s understanding. This can be illustrated with his own biography. Prominently, he opposed the Nazi-regime in 1933 and 1934 and tried to raise opposition in the German protestant Churches. During the years in Switzerland, he supported as best he could, the opposition against the Nazis, in Germany and elsewhere. After the war, he rushed to Germany to offer help to students in the destroyed country, and stayed with them in preliminary locations in Bonn. Later he opposed German re-armament and put serious questions in order to problematize the division West/East with the Iron Curtain, and opposed the development of the atomic bomb. He stayed in touch with church leaders in Hungary and Deutsche Demokratische Republik, talked with eastern political leaders and would not accept the rhetorics so widespread in the 1940ties and 50ties that communism was the same as totalitarianism on the same line as the Nazi-regime. The interesting point is still that he could do so without any theological reason. He used his own mind.

When we see the theological framework he builds for using his human reason in day to day decisions, we see that this is the limited responsibility he also draws in his theology of providence. Everyone has responsibility for what happens in the own context. The

³⁶ “Das Nichtige aber ist das, was Gott als Schöpfer nicht wählte, nicht wollte, woran er als Schöpfer vorüberging, was er nach der Beschreibung Gen. 1,2 als das Chaos hinter sich liess, ohne ihm Wesen und Existenz zu geben: Das Nichtige ist das, was nur in dieser *Negativität*, die ihm in Gottes Entscheidung zugewiesen ist... nur zu Gottes linker Hand wirklich ist, so und hier aber allerdings in seiner höchst eigentümliche Weise wirklich, relevant und sogar aktiv ist.” KD III/3 84.

³⁷ “Indem er /jeder Mensch/ sich selbst kennt, kennt er den Himmel und die Erde. Indem er sich selbst verantwortet, verantwortet er an seinem kleinen, aber in höchster Ernsthaftigkeit nun gerade ihm zugewiesenen Ort, in seiner kurzen aber in höchster Ernsthaftigkeit nun gerade ihm gewährten Stunde die Kreatur als solche und als Ganzes, ist er durchaus nicht nur eine Figur auf irgend einem Nebenkriegsschauplatz, sondern die verantwortliche Person an der Stelle in der Mitte aller Dinge, an der sich entscheidet, was aus der *ganzen* Kreatur werden soll.” KD III/3 265

responsibility is very limited, because we are put into a much broader framework, where God is an active actor on behalf of his creation. *Life and Divine power*

How to understand the presence of the divine in the creation? In a phrase that opens in the direction that Jürgen Moltmann underlines in his “God in Creation”, where Moltmann propagates panenteisme, that God is present in the very core of life.³⁸ All life has similarities in its progress, from microorganisms to whales, and this strange fact is here somewhat present in the language Løgstrup, Moltmann and Barth use.

So as Barth opens the reflections regarding the Universe, he stays also local: Human action is modest, is limited in time and space – but partaking in the All. At the end of the day: he is not far from the practical reasoning we found in Arendt’s re-reading of Socrates, after the disasters of World War II.

After World War II – don’t keep on staring at evil

One could find it strange that Barth, being on the offensive against the Nazi-influence in Germany and the German church from 1933 till 1945, does not discuss this period when he is dealing with evil. The volumes on creation is written in the period just after the war, first as lectures for students in Germany and Switzerland, then edited within the series of Church Dogmatic. The Volume III/3 is published in 1950. One can however clearly see that in his view, evil is hard on mankind, but on the other side not a theme to ponder on.

Barth then opposes the theological tradition that will see the consequence of the belief in creation as a link between God and evil, and then be compelled to develop a theodicy. On the contrary, Barth states, there are no link: God is permanently against evil, and in this continuous fight, his creation is invited to partake. Evil releases cruel forces, with hope-destroying consequences. This is nothing to understand, just to resist.

³⁸ See Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung. Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*, Chr. Kaiser, München 1985, 115.