
Awakening to Reality. An Approach to the Problem of Poverty

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“To live men without food is a fault that no circumstance attenuates; the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary does not apply here”

Rabbi Yochanan, *Synhedrin*, 104b

I. JUSTIFICATION

The present text has an autobiographical origin. The author is –temporarily– living in Nairobi (Kenya). There, he works as a lecturer in Strathmore University, a private institution where he teaches units related to philosophy. During his free time he likes to walk around. One day, at the beginning of one of those ‘sport walks’, three kids came towards him. They were asking for some money to buy food. Their English was poor, but the message clear. He answered that –with his sport outfit on– he had no money. It was true. It was also true that he didn’t want to give them money. “Imagine that they are sent by a criminal group that uses the kids to make business”, was his internal justification. Then, he made a promise to the boys: “Next time I will invite you to eat something, ok?”. And the kids, excited by that announcement, answered with a big smile saying “Thank you! *Asante sana!*”.

The author continued his walk (as I already said, it had just started) and suddenly realized that he had not acted well: his house was quite near, he could have gone to get some Kenyan Shillings, but he had preferred his rest and his convenience first rather than attending to the children. “But it is not my fault, if they are hungry”, he reasoned. But the reasoning was false: they were just

children! Even if someone was using them (and perhaps it was not the case), they were innocent!¹ How could it be possible: to leave a hungry child so as to avoid the trouble? “It is my fault. The children, ten or eleven years old as they are, are not at all guilty at all of their situation”. So the author decided to turn back and mend his error. By then the kids had already left.

During the following days the author scoured that street sometimes looking for the children. On the fourth day they appeared. “Were you expecting me?”. “No!”. “Let’s eat something”. “Thank you!”, was their answer, said with an incredible smile of gratitude. The lunch didn’t cost more than a euro each (they were three). “Next time we have to look for some clothes. You all are wearing rugs”, said the author. “Thank you!”, they added and went away running and playing.

And that they did. The author asked them to ask their parents to meet him, and talking with them, they got to know each other. And the conversation would go something like this: “At the beginning I called you just ‘the musungu’”. *Musungu* is the label, the universal name, for white people in Kenya. “Now you are my friend!”.

From that moment on the author started to discover how life inside the slums was: misery, filth, loneliness, violence, lack of hygiene, hunger, unemployment, lack of formation, etc. And all that was happening no more than about seven hundred meters away from the University where the author was working, an elegant and Western like environment. And that slum (Kibera) has around (or more) a million people: a whole city of poor and completely invisible citizens.

It was then that the author decided to do something, whatever he could, asking for advice, trying to define what could be better; buying clothes and food, or helping in education?, and all the time trying not to be cheated by some of the cunning inhabitants of Kibera. This, he decided, was going to be the first time in his life (a philosophical life!) when he was going to do something practical. It was a conscious decision to get out of his comfort zone.

Three months later the author had managed to get some money from his friends and from unknown donors. With that he was taking care of the school

1 Cf. this same ‘existential reasoning’ in Sarah, R. C. (2015), p. 143: «If I really listen to the teachings of Jesus, I would rather be robbed than lack charity».

fees of up to 56 children, among them the three of the first encounter. At the same time, their parents, mostly single mothers or widows, had started some entrepreneur programs to prepare them to start their own small business using credits given from the author's small foundation. From the same initiative some university students had also been able to pay for the fees that would allow them to finish their degrees. Similarly an institution that takes care of 100 'Street Boys' got through the Author the contacts that will help to adjust its balance.

Meantime, the bonds between the *musungu* and the beneficiaries had grown: they liked to invite him to their homes, small shanties made of mud and pieces of wood, to share the nothing they had with him, and to tell him their problems in a confident way, their dreams, their happiness, their worries. Thanks to this conversations, the author has been able to erase from his mind the 'universal categories' he had: poor people, dangerous people, self-interested people, uneducated people with poor conversation..., and has heard their voices and their silences. In other terms, he has experienced the sense of community with people that, *a priori*, had nothing in common with him, being an educated European, without any very remarkable economic problems, a person with a position in society, etc.

Then one day, the dean of the school where this author was a visiting professor asked to him: "How did you acquire this inclination towards the poor?". The answer to that question was the inspiration of this paper.

II. ABSTRACTIONS: WAR, VICTIMS, SOLDIERS

Every War is built on abstractions. The main tool used to get that is *propaganda*.

The main abstraction is against the citizens, who now are victims, enemies or soldiers.

1) The *victims* do not have a proper noun: refugees, displaced people, bargain chip, collateral damage. They run, put down their heads, and are stripped from houses and things. They lose their contexts, their things, their point of reference, everything that made them and the World know who they were. Anonymity, solitude. They see themselves obliged to be humble, to look down, to keep quiet, to wait.

2) The *enemies* have got no history. They are not humans and, as a consequence, they have no value and no dignity, no names. They respond just to a general name, to a universal name: ‘enemy’, ‘the Others’, ‘a German’, ‘a Tutsi’. When someone in the side of justice (‘our side’) looks at them, he sees just that: ‘a soldier’, ‘an individual of a class’. Most of the times that watching is done from a hidden position (from the barricade), a ‘point of view’ that enables just to watch the uniform, the arms, the threat. The enemy has been stripped from his biography, his personality, his personal relations (family, friends, injustices, right and wrong doings), and limited to be the ‘role’ that he is playing in that drama. The enemy is just that, ‘enemy’, even if the observer experiments the danger he is passing through as a personal danger, even if the observer wants to survive because he has ahead a personal life to live. For the observer the ‘enemy’ is just a thing, without feelings, without selfhood, in which experiences of danger and desire of survival are not supposed to be. He is deposed from his *humanity*: he just is an idea hovering in front of us that does not deserve to exist; he is just like an insect, like litter. The *propaganda* always highlight this approach.

3) The *soldiers* are also created inside the abstraction. Since Plato, warriors were in Society to defend business and businessmen and to help towards the expansion of the City. A soldier is a tool, trained to use violence in order to fulfill the good of the community. Soldiers don’t act following their own convictions or ideas: they are trained to obey the orders of the King (who holds the role of reason in the individuals). They are not supposed to think at all: they are not (expected to act as) ‘rational animals’. Just like “As a good race dog, gifted at the same time with docility and ferocity”. “They ought to be dangerous to their enemies, and gentle to their friends; if not, they will destroy themselves without waiting for their enemies to destroy them”².

They *obey*. Obedience in the soldier is realized, as an archetype, and as Levinas’ asserts: “Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves”³, like objects, like puppets, but no longer as *persons*. No longer as “existents that can speak rather than lending their lips to an anonymous utterance of history”⁴. They don’t have (they are supposed not having...) initiative. They are not alive, at least in the sense that we say a person is alive: as a source of his/her own acts.

2 Cf. Plato, *Republic II*, 375-376.

3 Levinas, E. (1979), p. 21.

4 Levinas, E. (1979), p. 23.

This is what Shakespeare alludes in the *Merchant of Venice*:

“Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”⁵.

No. A soldier, shan’t.

Following the famous doctrine of Plato⁶, and describing what can be seen in every army in the World, soldiers are not supposed to be interested in material goods. They have left everything to serve ‘the Ideal’, being that the Leader, the Country, the State, the Revolution. Curiously, all these terms are abstractions too. Soldiers don’t have private property (money, family, house. They are free of bounds because they are bounded to the higher goal, to the *mission*. They have renounced to their own taste and personality by dressing with uniform, living in barracks. They have renounced all initiatives. They follow orders, and cannot ask themselves about them. A soldier is supposed to be, at least, an *amoral being*, and he cannot appeal to ‘problems of conscience’, or if he does, these are considered as cowardice and treason⁷. Soldiers have no proper noun anymore: they are ‘troops’, numbers, their identity is their rank. They don’t have either personal aims (so to speak, their only aim can be ‘victory’, the ‘general good’, but not self-surviving or personal cultivation). The warrior renounces to be himself for the sake of ‘a better good’: the Social Order.

In the contemporary practice of war, fighting is no longer circumscribed to the combatants. It affects whole populations; civilians and soldiers as well resulting in massive numbers of death and killings. The level of abstraction has reached new limits. It can be seen in several phenomena.

In Vietnam ‘they’, the enemy, were just ‘Charlie’: a common name able to absorb all the North Vietnamese in one simple idea. ‘Killing Charlie’

5 *The Merchant of Venice*, Act. III, Scene 1.

6 Plato, *The Republic*, p. 375 and following.

7 This lack of ‘personal attachments’ are a good psychological explanation of the great number of war crimes against civil population, as rape used as an arm or as a ‘soldier’s right’, perpetrated without any consciousness of guilt. Cf. Beevor, A. (2003).

helped the soldiers not to ask about the personal lives of the victims, or about the reasons why they were fighting in the name of America (another abstraction)⁸.

The ‘banality of evil’ is provoked by abstraction. This expression, coined by Hanna Arendt’s famous and polemical essay *Eichmann in Jerusalem*⁹, has become obvious in Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*, a 2012 uneasy documentary about the death-squad leaders of the Indonesian killings of 1965–66¹⁰. In this film, the Director invites Anwar (the leader of the executioners, who is said to have killed more than 1.000 with his own hands) and his men to represent the killings they perpetrated. They do that by playing, following the movies they like. Sometimes dressed as cowboys, other times as mafia members. They talk about different techniques they used to commit the killings, how to move, how to avoid the blood spots. When Anwar is invited to act as a victim himself he gets sick and cannot continue. And he can’t because it is only then, helped by Oppenheimer’s words, than he realizes that his victims knew they were going to be killed, that they were not acting but suffering the fear and the anguish of an imminent and unfair death. “Could I have sinned?”, Anwar asks to himself. And, in that very moment he starts the experience of *Awakening to Reality*.

A soldier has to be slept. That is the meaning of ‘living in abstraction’. It is clear, especially in two actions of the Modern War: the indiscriminate bombings from air, and the role of snipers.

The first, bombing, reached dramatic levels at the end of the II World War with Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki as its sad testimonies. In February 13, 1945, the German city of Dresden suffered a bombing raid that left more than 135.000 people dead, more than the victims of the Atomic Bombings of the the two Japanese cities. 800 American and English aircrafts dropped more than 3,400 tons of explosives (phosphorus bombs mostly), killing men, women and children. Two raids, with a difference of some hours to permit the survivors of the first to get out from their refuges and thereby fulfill a ‘success’. An ‘unconditional surrender’ claim was probably behind that attack. But if it existed, it was not only because of Churchill, Roosevelt and their strategists, but also because 800 pilots –and a big number of soldiers–

8 A literary expression of this experience: Tim O’Brien, *The Things they Carried*.

9 Arendt, H. (2006).

10 Oppenheimer, J. (2012).

were ready to obey an order without asking any question about the military importance of that city (mostly full of hospitals, women and children, refugees and craftsmen). What did the pilots, or the soldiers in the planes know about the attack? How did they experienced the death of so many people, most of them people who were not involved with the War? Did they see the photos of the thousands of burned corpses? Or did they just close their eyes and ‘pushed a bottom to drop *the load*’?

Could an argument such as: ‘They did the same in London with the V2’ be a justification to their action? Perhaps we could drive the question to another one: who would be ‘they’?: Hitler and the SS?, ‘the Germans’?, the Dresden kids?, the wounded soldiers in the hospitals and the doctors and nurses who took care of them?, the craftsmen who had a business in that city?

In an impressive, and courageous, article against the appointment of Harry S. Truman for an Honorary Degree in Oxford University, the philosopher, G.E.M. Anscombe wrote:

“for some time before war broke out (...) there was propaganda in this country [UK] on the subject of the ‘indivisibility’ of modern war. The civilian population, we were told, is really as much a combatant as the fighting forces. Therefore the distinction between the people engaged in prosecuting the war and the population at large is unreal. (...) There was a doctrine of ‘collective responsibility’ with a lugubriously elevated moral tone about it. The upshot was that it was senseless to draw any line between legitimate and illegitimate objects of attack. (...)”. She ends the paragraph with sad irony: “I am not sure how children and the aged fitted into this story: probably they cheered the soldiers and munitions workers up”¹¹.

Anyone becomes an enemy, a ‘soldier’, and then there is a justification for the killing of innocent people: they were not innocent, because they belonged to an idea (here we could repeat again the Monologue by Shylock: ‘An idea, or a self, a mother, a father, a child, an elder?’).

How could a man as Harry S. Truman take such a decision as dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Continues Anscombe:

“I have long been puzzled by the common cant about President Truman’s courage in making this decision. (...) Given the right circumstances (*e.g.* that

11 Anscombe, G. E. M. (1981), p. 2.

no one whose opinion matters will disapprove), a quite mediocre person can do spectacularly wicked things without thereby becoming impressive”¹².

The tiger was not the President’s courage, but his *mediocrity*, his *banality*..., his *abstraction*. It is what allowed him to say ‘yes’ to the death by the burning of thousands of people.

Innocent people? At least as innocent as the American lives he was convinced to save. Did he think about the victims? A reading from *Black Rain*, a master piece by Masuji Ibuse¹³, could help to understand Anscombe’s indignation: the consequences of the Bomb were not the end of the hostilities, but *the deaths of thousands of times ‘one’*, with their vices, and their virtues; with the unique approach to reality, with their children that weren’t born after the attack, with the lovers that would not fulfill their love.

To show how true these considerations are, it is enough to make the game of exchanging murderers with the victims. What would have been the effects of that attack in ours hometowns? What if a big part of our families would have been killed in such an ignoble way? The dead are numbers only in the distance; when it happens at home the dead have a proper noun and their own story. We can suppose the same will happen with those men and women in the other side of the World. Of course, to do so, we need to make a big effort, because for us it is easier to reduce them to ideas (100.000 corpses in Nagasaki, 147 victims in Garissa) than to face the reality (this one; this one; this one... 100.000 times). We show our indignation when the enemy violates the Law of Nations. Perhaps we are more lax with ourselves.

A soldier is an abstraction. When he fights, he can be killed, and it is not murder. But if they (soldiers) surrender, they become “innocent and so may not be mistreated or killed. Nor is there ground for trying them on a criminal charge; no, indeed, because a soldier has no personal responsibility for fighting, but because they were not the subjects of the state whose prisoners they are”¹⁴. The soldier has been ‘suspended’ from his uniqueness, from his personality, from his responsibility, but not in an ontological way: he is still the person he is, even if the uniform or the orders try to hide it. It all has a lot to do with the experience of the snipers.

12 Anscombe, G. E. M. (1981), p. 3.

13 Ibuse, M. (1994). Why another reference to a novel? Because in narrative the encounter with the individual (with his/her story) is possible in a way that doesn’t exist in History (made for and by generals) or Statistics.

14 Anscombe, G. E. M. (1981), p. 5.

In 1920 Major Hesketh-Prichard published his work *Sniping in France*, a treatise about the formation of scouts, observers and snipers during the First World War. The reasons for sniping were mostly two: the effectiveness in killing enemies and the impact those attacks had in the morale of the troops. A trench dominated by enemy snipers had a very hard life. And in 1915 the advantage in this new tactic of war was all in the hands of the Germans¹⁵.

The task of Mayor Hesketh-Prichard was to prepare a platoon of snipers. His knowledge was centered in telescope-sighted rifles, and his aim was to teach the men under his command to manipulate and adjust them properly. He explained how snipers have to work in pairs, one with the rifle, the other looking for *targets* (in the trainings, shooting to plaster heads prepared by himself; later, in the battle field, to the heads of enemy soldiers that, after the shot, disappeared from the horizon).

“A horse before breakfast, on which I would set forth to find a range, followed by an hour in the Pioneer’s shop, pasting up targets made out of old Daily Mails on to frames –the snipers of the brigade paraded at nine o’clock, the march to the improvised range, shooting the telescopic sights at the target, and after dark a lecture in some barn, was often the order of the day”¹⁶.

For Hesketh-Prichard the objective was clear. He explains as follows: “sniping seems to me to be the art of I.-Finding your mark. II.-Defining your mark. III.-Hitting your mark”, where ‘mark’ is a neutral word that ought to be substituted by ‘killing a lot of Germans’¹⁷. It is not in our interest to know how to success in the exercise of calibrating a telescope sight. The idea is to underline the abstraction: here the ‘mark’, the ‘German’, have been given equal consideration. And it seems to make no difference to get “17 hits on a model of a human head at 430 yards in the first 21 shots”¹⁷, than to hit the head or shoulder of a human being.

“I remember watching a German sentry (...). He never gave an opportunity for a shot, though periodically he used to peer quickly over the parapet and as quickly subside; but one got quite used to his routine. His dinner was brought him at his post, where he seemed to remain for very long hours. Once a friend, who was engaged in painting a notice, seemed to come and sit and talk with him. The sentry himself was an exceedingly young German, and I

15 Hesketh-Prichard, H. (1920).

16 Hesketh-Prichard, H. (1920), chapter 1.

17 Hesketh-Prichard, H. (1920), chapter 1.

should say an extraordinarily bad sentry. He sometimes used to shoot at us if we gave him provocation, but he was an appallingly bad shot. He was so exceedingly young that I was very glad that I had not a rifle with me, for when at last he did give a chance it was the Company-Sergeant-Major, who cared not if he was young or old, *who did what was necessary*"¹⁸.

A man without a name, a man without responsibility. A man wasting his youth in a trench, instead of learning at the University or ploughing the field. A man without a face or a body that, suddenly, after a quick shoot, disappears forever from our horizon of comprehension and worries.

The problem is that abstraction is not so easy. The problem is that reality is obstinate, and that *death* comes back with her proper nouns. It can be seen on David Grossman's book *On Killing*¹⁹, and in the interviews that, under the same title, were released on *You tube* in 2015²⁰. Grossman underlines how it is *distance* that facilitates the act of killing: the more the distance, the less the need for repentance or regret; the less the distance, the greater the horror and brutality²¹. That is why to throw bombs from a plane is more affordable than to shoot or stab someone, even if the damage is bigger. To plan an attack on a table or a computer, to follow a 'smart' bomb through the screen in an office, is less traumatic than being in the first line of action. The face of the victim calls for the responsibility of the executioner. To put a mask on their eyes is a work of mercy not only for the victim, but mainly for the hangman.

Lonnie, a veteran from the Vietnam war, explains his first killing. In the documentary we hear his story, how he was surrounded by the enemies, and how his comrades were all injured. Then he saw a silhouette..., "and I blast it". "Later, after you get home... He was a young man, just as I was. Only..., he was in his country, trying to kill me, the s. of a b. who was in his country, from taking his country. I didn't try to make it wrong. It was just wrong. The man was death. He went from dreams and aspirations..., to nothing. All the things I could be fighting for (God, Country) went aside as soon as I killed my first person. Everything becomes a fraud"²².

18 Hesketh-Prichard, H. (1920), chapter 6.

19 Grossman, D. (2009).

20 *On Killing*: cut.com, on You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsfbO9oz0GI>

21 Grossman, D. (2009), Section III, pp. 99-140.

22 Both testimonies in *On Killing*: cut.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsfbO9oz0GI>

Daniel, on his part, tells how it is easy to dissociate when you are shooting spots in the jungle, a ‘general shooting’. On the contrary, when you have in your hands one young Vietnamese,

“you feel very compassionate. I was thinking about how this boy would have his family, his girlfriend... It was a moment that I went through that I think affected me a lot. I didn’t feel any personal guilt. I felt sorry for him. When I came back from Vietnam I didn’t talk about it... for years. (...) I think now that killing is mostly never justified. In war no-one deserves to die: the guy in that side is fighting for what he believes in; you are fighting for what you believe in..., both have families, and children probably: it is not a good thing”²³.

Some philosophers have called attention to this phenomena: the pass from ‘generality’ to ‘concreteness’ in the military action. And the experience has been always taken as an *awakening to reality*. Michael Waltzer and Alain Finkelkraut make reference to the same episode, narrated by an Italian sniper in the First World War²⁴, a soldier that becomes another one in the recurrent chain of soldiers who –by declining to fight– appear to regain their right of living a life.

Lussu as a sniper describes his experience when he has an Austrian official in range, in the trenches. How, just before shooting, he discovers his target as a man the moment the official (Lussu’s target) lights a cigarette and Lussu becomes incapable of shooting: a man, a man, a man..., and not simply an enemy, just something hated, not just a thing, a thing. “They were men and soldiers like us. They drink coffee, smoke,, talk between them, have breakfast at the same time than us!”²⁵.

And, in this context, the act of erasing, even in war, appears as the most absurd reality. Lussu adds: “I could distinguish his eyes, and the features on his face. The dawn light was breaking, the sun was appearing back in the mountains. To shoot a man that way, just some steps away from me, as if he were a wild boar!”. Lussu is fulminated by evidence. He strips the enemy official from those two qualities, ‘official’ and ‘enemy’, because the man had lit a cigarette. “Under the effects of recognition Lussu is able to be in the position of that unknown who is under his power. Without previous warning,

23 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsfbO9oz0GI>

24 Walzer, M. (2015); Finkelkraut, A. (1998).

25 Cf. Finkelkraut, A. (1998), pp. 34-37.

compassion takes possession of him, the identification with the mortal suffering that he is going to inflict to that man. Lussu does not shoot. He withdraws”²⁶.

The key seems to be to defeat anonymity. The numbers are so big! Since the First World War (an Industrial or Scientific war!), heroism or name are not tested anymore in combat. Achilles or Hector brightness –ready to die for the beauty of an heroic deed– do not exist anymore. The only thing that can be confirmed in 1918 is the disappearance of Man in number. Facing the pressure of the enormous (8 million killed people), each man’s humanity –friend or enemy–, as long as loses his character of uniqueness, suffers an unprecedented devaluation, that maybe could not be restored²⁷.

The problem is the number: a burden too heavy for each person. T. S. Eliot remembers that in his *Four Quartets*: “Human kind cannot bear very much reality”²⁸. We live more pleasantly in the abstract, in the idea, in the anonymity of victims that have no solutions for the great problems and have to live in a common state of passivity and obedience (what Plato would call *natural slavery*).

But for Lussu that doesn’t rule anymore. “What does it mean that someone has a right to life? To say that is to recognize a fellow creature, who is not threatening me, whose activities have the savor of peace and camaraderie, whose person is as valuable as my own. An enemy has to be described differently, and though the stereotypes through which he is seen are often grotesque, they have a certain truth. An enemy alienates himself from me and from our common humanity when he tries to kill me. But whereas the alienation is temporary, the humanity is permanent. It is restored, as it were, by the prosaic acts that break down the stereotypes: because he is funny, naked, and so on, my enemy has changed, as Lussu says, into a man. ‘A man!’”²⁹.

A similar experience happens when you deal with the glance of a poor person. Not with poverty, but with the person. And this experience is stronger if that person is still a child: the weakness, the innocence, mixed with the uniqueness of a person, of ‘the Person’.

26 Finkelkraut, A. (1998), pp. 34-37.

27 Cf. Finkelkraut, A. (1998), pp. 34-37.

28 Eliot, T. S. ‘Burt Norton’, in *Four Quartets*.

29 Walzer, M. (2015), chapter 9, ‘*Naked soldiers*’.

III. MACRO AND MICRO COOPERATION

When we ask about the specific characteristics of Modern Science, one of the words that we would use to describe that way to access to reality is ‘quantity’. Before the XVIII Century –and mostly in the classic and medieval interpretation of the world³⁰– the predominant word would be ‘quality’. A word full of meanings has been substituted by a word made of numbers, ‘written in the language of Mathematics’.

“Until the end of the XVIII Century, so to speak, the time of Lavoisier, Chemistry didn’t learn to speak que quantitative language. From then on, a quick progress can be observed”³¹. A progress in the development of that science, and in the technological development. In fact, that ‘point of view’ is seldom taken as the only possible one. Or, at least, as the only valid one if we leave out poetical (sentimental and private) approaches.

The *poetical* can be applied to the field of arts –literature, paintings, music–: things to enjoy in the moments of idleness, but that does not have much to do with the hard and real life of work, a life that is far from epic attitudes, that enjoys the vulgar banality of the daily repetition. And *poetical* can be applied, as well, to philosophy, because it is a knowledge more related to quality than to quantity (unless you reduce philosophy to the linguistic analysis of philosophical texts, as somehow happens in *academia*). Metaphysics, Philosophical Anthropology, Ethics..., how does one distinguish them from the mere opinions, or the *witty remarks* of the poets? And, since Plato, we know that poets have been thrown out of the City. We have done the same: what is the usefulness of a philosopher in companies, in government, in the University, in the cooperation? Philosophers deal with ideas, with concepts that are far from the ordinary people’s comprehension, concepts that do not bring profits or bread. Isn’t it so?

And it isn’t. The reason is simple: our knowledge is not immediate. We go deeper in our understanding as long as we apply our attention, and effort, and we ask for advice or help (in the group of research, going to the books, etc.). Even doing that, our knowledge is partial: the specialization of knowledge (totally present at the University, but also in the Business World) is a reality. Of course, it is really useful to move forward in that field; but the price

30 Cf. Lewis, C.S. (2012).

31 Cassirer, E. (1968), p. 185.

to pay can be to forget that that field is only a perspective, and not to realize that we can be losing the great picture, or that we can lose the ‘real’ (in latin, the ‘*boc aliquid*’, ‘this something’), hidden under multiple layers of specialization.

Let us look at the case of poverty. Poverty is something that goes beyond our capacities. In fact, the moment you start dealing with numbers, the hearer can have the temptation of giving up hope: what can we do against a problem of that magnitude? We are overwhelmed. The World Bank calculates that in 2012, 896 million people subsisted with less than US\$1,90 per day³². But, in the higher lines of poverty the progress is slower: 2.200 million people subsist with US\$3,10. To compare, the population in Europe is a little bit more than 507 million people. Europe plus the 320 million of US citizens would be still much less than the number of poorest people in the World³³.

This level of poverty means that the poor do not have the capacity to save money, to have a project of life in the future (for them, for their children). It means that they have to live purely in *the present*, even if man can be defined as *a being towards the future*³⁴. The tragedy of poverty (besides hunger, lack of water and shelter, lack of education...) is that it throws out the poor from civil life: they don’t have voice, but not only because no one want to hear them, but mainly because they don’t have the possibility to speak because they are completely busy trying to survive *today*. For them there is no *yesterday*, there is no *tomorrow*: living for the *instant* means expulsion from history. They live anonymously, in the *outskirts* of the human life. “The experience of slum-dwellers starkly illustrates that people living in poverty not only face deprivation but are also trapped in that poverty because they are excluded from the rest of society, denied a say, and threatened with violence and insecurity”³⁵.

But the main problem is not the numbers. These can seem not so important. In a conversation I held with a Kenyan businessman, he asserted

32 <http://www.bancomundial.org/es/topic/poverty/overview> (March 29th, 2016).

33 In Kenya, the number of people under the level of US\$1,90 a day was 33’6% in 2015. It means more than 14 million people, almost the population of Holland. <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/KEN> (March 29th, 2016)

34 This is the radical definition of man to the Spanish Philosopher J. Marias in *Metaphysical Anthropology: The Empirical Structure of Human Life*.

35 Amnesty International, *Kenya: The unseen majority. Nairobi’s two million slum-dwellers*, 2009, https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/rap_kenia_the_unseen_majority.pdf. A fact they provide: half of the population in Nairobi lives in slums; these suppose only the 5% of the residential area and just a 1% of all land in the city. Perhaps Korogocho slum is the hardest one (120.000 people in 1 square kilometre), even if the most famous is Kibera.

something like this: “Of a population of 43 million people, there are *only* up to 7 million in the ‘slums’. You cannot speak of real poverty in Kenya!”. And, of course, you cannot, if you look at it from the quantitative point of view. In *macroeconomics* terms, the number of people living in slums, the number of needy people, is not *so* big (a 33%!). It is even smaller if the ordinary life of one person happens out of that environment, and there is not a near clash with the reality of the life of others. Or there can be some corporative commitments in the fight against poverty, or in the effort for development, and that can provide a reason, a justification, to calm down the consciousness and to argue that “*we are fighting* seriously against poverty”. And in that sentence ‘we’ stands for ‘some people’ in the Company (and many time for aesthetic reasons).

And that is true. Many people (international organizations, engineers or bankers, businessmen, doctors, etc.) are acting to increase the level of wealth in many needy environments. Health programs, school programs, electrification programs, and so on. There is an incredible space for creativity, as –for instance– is happening with the solar energy: small solar panels, that are paid for with a loan with very small daily quantities using the mobile money as mean of payment³⁶, and that help to have light up homes without the need to use kerosene (very pollutant, unhealthy and with a low power light), and that –step by step– are providing different point of light in the house (living room, kitchen, children’s room) making life in the country side much better.

This kind of cooperation is needed. To build a Country you need big quantities of money, amounts that a particular or individual donor cannot provide. So, the work done by the World Bank Group, the African Development Bank, International Monetary Fund, International Red Cross, UN, UNICEF, World Food Program, or the hundreds of national Development Aid Agencies, is necessary.

But it is not enough, because mostly it happens in a level of abstraction. And in this level, fighting against poverty can be something similar to fighting the ‘enemy’ in a war: an action in which the reality of the Other, his uniqueness, can be easily forgotten³⁷.

36 In Kenya the most popular system is M-Pesa. Cf. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/05/economist-explains-18>

37 There is also a discussion (sometimes a *bitter* discussion) about the real efficiency of the *macro* help. The debate can be followed reading Jeffrey Sacks, *The End of Poverty*, and the answers against Sacks thesis provided by Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid. Why Aid is not Working and How there is Another Way for Africa*; or William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden. Why the West Effort to Aid the Rest Have Done so much Ill and so little Good*.

There is a question that is easy to ask: *what is the meaning of success?* Sometimes we can think that the answer is quantitative. That ‘there are 50 million less poor people today than 15 years ago’ is a good answer. And it is. But it is not, because there are still 896 (or 2.200!), million people in a situation that goes against their dignity, against the human rights.

Is number what matters when dealing with human beings? To answer affirmatively to this question is the approach of the scientific way of thinking. But is Man (each of us) a part of a whole?, are we ‘individuals’ of a ‘species’? Everything is at stake in the answer to this question. There are “two conceptions of human: the Christian, that defends that the individual is sacred, and affirms that the rules of arithmetic must not be applied to human unities. The other conception starts from the fundamental collective principle that the collective end justifies the means, and not only allows (but demands) that the individual has to be subordinated and can be sacrificed, on behalf of the community, that can dispose of him, as the guinea pig for the experiment or the lamb for the sacrifice”³⁸.

If you are not ready to kill animals for research, how do you hope to get vaccines against cholera or diphtheria? So, when we are dealing with the great numbers, how can we be worried about the fate of some thousands, hundreds or tens of people? It is happening already with biological research. The problem are the numbers, the consequentialist point of view. How many people could be cured from diabetes if we would have permission to experiment with embryos?; how many if we could experiment with old people about whom no-one is concerned? Would not this be a last criteria to justify playing with a life by questioning the ‘utility’ of that life?

A similar thing can happen also in the fight against poverty. For instance, if the donor demands conditions that could be considered as a new form of colonization (control of the population policies), or if the aid has no interest in understanding the local culture (i.e.: the importance of tradition, or family, or religion, or God, in that community, applying european standards), etc. And, specially, if you are more concerned with the development of the 13% of the population than with the actual problem of *this person* (a sick child, a hungry man, a pregnant woman) that is out of every statistical studio. “13% of the population is doing better in some aspect, but I am still starving, without an education, living in a *shanty*, without future”.

38 Finkelkraut, A. (1998), p. 79.

It can be said that: “We are doing many things to alleviate poverty!”, and, at the same time, the speaker can be a perfect stranger to the personal problem inside poverty. It is quite known how Heidegger’s *Being and Time* dealt with “the everyday Being of the ‘there’ and the falling of the Dasein”. In his phenomenological description of three radicals of human life (idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity) he shows a guiltless but real situation: Man has a lot of challenges if he wants to go beyond the most exterior layer of reality. We (hidden as we are in our thoughts, ideas, and *common places*) are incapable of taking *responsibility* to implement *the care* towards the needy.

“*Idle talk* discloses to Dasein a Being towards its world, towards Others, and towards itself –a Being in which these are understood, but in a mode of groundless floating. *Curiosity* discloses everything and anything, yet in such a way that Being-in is everywhere and nowhere. *Ambiguity* hides nothing from Dasein’s understanding, but only in order that Being-in-the-world should be suppressed in this uprooted ‘everywhere and nowhere’”³⁹.

Inauthenticity is described as “the kind which is completely fascinated by the ‘world’ and by the Dasein-with of Others in the ‘they’”⁴⁰, and denominates it as *fall*: humankind cannot bear too much reality; and that is why “individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves”⁴¹. Those forces have not been imposed; they are just accepted in that life that men like to live in the depth of the Den (Plato).

To live in the ‘impersonal’, in the ‘something is actually being done by someone’, in the ‘there’, is a temptation that threaten every human person: our intellectual knowledge is the lowest intelligence in the chain of beings⁴², and instead of recognizing our limitation, we prefer to hide it to ourselves (inauthenticity), and to remain in the level of generality. But as a consequence we lose the Reality, we lose the *person*: Lissu’s experience remains out from our life, and we prefer to deal with *poverty* more than with the *poor people* or –better– with *this poor or needy person* that somehow has crossed my path.

The cooperation that finds its style in dealing with *each one* is what could be called *micro*.

39 Heidegger, M. (2001), p. 221.

40 Heidegger, M. (2001), p. 220.

IV. BENEVOLENCE

The *person* is not an idea, a universal abstraction, an essence, a number. The *person* is not, as a consequence, something related with quantity. This supposes that the mathematical approach is useless on her behalf. *Person* is a proper noun, even if it is a common noun: it is the general noun that points out the ‘oneness’, the ‘absoluteness’ of each different *one*. Two different persons are not two units of the same general idea: each one is only herself. The number can make bigger the damage (v.g.: 147 people were killed in Garissa’s terrorist attack), but it is not because of the number (quantity), but because each one of the victims (147 times one).

Person is not the same as *Nature*. This started to be clear through the study of the Christological dogmas at the beginning of Christianity. In Jesus Christ there are two different natures (divine and human) but only one Person (Jesus the Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity). And any identification between person and nature would drive to a death lane in which the Mystery would be lost.

Aquinas says that man “is the principle of his actions, as having free-will and control of his actions”⁴³. With that he is indicating that man has power over himself: Man is not a being trapped in the current of instincts, but someone able to go beyond them, responsible to overcome them. Plessner used the expression “eccentricity”⁴⁴. It is the opposite to “centrality”, the main characteristic of any being related to the World only from the perspective of its own interest (in fact, the ‘interest’ is not ‘its own’, but something that happens to it under the names of *passions* and *instincts*).

To have control over his actions man does not need to identify himself with his nature: he is above this nature, and disposes of it. In fact, Man can act against his nature (*contra natura*), and harm himself as himself⁴⁵. *Virtues* and *vices* –as habits in general– can be understood from this point of view: the openness of the human being, the use of his freedom.

The one who holds something is different from the thing held: Man can be *Lord* (and can be *slave*) of his nature because he is *beyond* his nature. Radi-

41 Levinas, E. (1979).

42 Cf. *Summa Theologica* I, q. 76, a. 1; q. 79, a. 8.

43 *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Prologue.

44 Cf. de Mul, J. (ed.), (2014).

45 Cf. *Summa Theologica* I-II q. 71, a. 2, c.

cally taken, this idea could signify that there is not such a thing as ‘human nature’ (Sartre). But in that case all human action would be meaningless, there would not be “up and down”⁴⁶. If we try to keep the balance –if we deal with the concept of eccentricity in an accurate way–, we have to affirm that man has a responsibility over himself (and the others) because living in accordance to his nature is something that is not for granted: “Man is the being who has to learn how to be himself in order to be so” (J. Choza). This is the reason for the existence of Ethics (as an effort, and as a science). If we had enough with our instincts, if we were determined to action, it would be meaningless to learn how to do what we have to do. Man is open ‘*ad multa et diversa*’ (‘to many and different things’, Aquinas). So, he has to built his *Second Nature*: this is the structure of habits, of virtues.

In conclusion: there is something in the human being (his most radical source of being, the *Person*) that is beyond nature, beyond the universal, the generality, the definition, the idea of human. And this (that in each case cannot be replaced for other) is what make of each of us an *absolute*. This word, *absolute*, means ‘someone –not something– that has as much value in itself as the group of all the others’. Using an expression taken from Spaeman: a Person is a being not relative to any context. Saving one person is as important as saving the whole humanity.

But, how does one reach that *experience of the Absolute*? And we use this word, *experience*, because the *person* cannot be reached by a chain of syllogisms (that kind of chain always head to a general conclusion, to concepts). The answer: by *awakening to reality*. And it can happen especially when you experience the power of the other’s glance. To wake up is to open the eyes to the light from darkness. And my eyes can cross with the eyes of the other: a sight that crosses with my own sight, that *comes into sight*. When this encounter happens, one has the experience of *overflowing*, of having had an encounter with something that escapes to my control, to the bias and forecast that I could have prepared.

The meaning of that encounter is to present “the subjectivity of welcoming the Other, as hospitality. Hence intentionality, where thought remains an *adequation* with the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level. All knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently *non-adequation*”⁴⁷. Hospitality: to give shelter, in the

46 Nietzsche, F. *The Gay Science*, § 125.

47 Levinas, E. (1979), p. 27.

look, in the smile, in the hand, in the hug. To welcome: and act of affirmation: “It is good that you are!” (Pieper).

Hospitality means recognizing the Other in his self being, and not as someone that can add something to me (pleasure, utility, interest). Hospitality is a relationship in which the centrality of the instinct’s circle has been overcome. A relation lived not looking for profit, but in itself. In which the Other is seen as Other (as the source of a complete new vision of the World, as new as mine own view can be, even in his lack of education, or in his youth, or in his poverty). And then I react as someone who has faced a responsibility of taking care, of helping, if there are obstacles against the development of that intimacy, or against the possibility of showing and sharing the innovation born in that intimacy (the ‘oneself word in History’ that can be supposed for any man).

“To contain more than one’s capacity is to shatter at every moment the framework of a content that is thought, to cross the barriers of immanence – but without this descent into being reducing itself anew to a concept of descent. (...) The idea of infinity (which is not a representation of infinity) sustain activity itself”⁴⁸: the Other cannot be said, but lived. The person is made present in the *co-existence*, in the relationship, when you exist-with-the-other. This is the meaning of shattering the frameworks: there is not tag to portray a person. You have to deal with him, with her. You have to listen, to be-with. An aim is a good action, to invest money on development is a good action, but not necessarily a good action for the person who receives that help: “are they thinking about me? Am I just a number, a statistic? Do I (myself) care?”.

The idea of infinity supposes a co-existence in which the Other is respected as Other, without trying to take control over him, without an imposition of the image (representation) that I can have of him. Otherwise, the other would experience my presence as an unjust burden, as the hand that tries to move him from outside. Paternalism is a great temptation in cooperation: for the helped and for the beneficiary. To deal with them as if they were children, without respect, without confidence, without being in their shoes. What we are asked for is to recognize their identity (their otherness); what we ask for is to be also recognized as an ‘other’ and to be introduced as the self that each one of us is, in that person’s personal project. To sum up: Each one of us presents his self as a gift (that can be rejected or accepted), and each one of us

48 Levinas, E. (1979), p. 27.

accepts the gift freely made by the other (not imposed, not asked as a condition for our help). Here we are talking about a real personal relationship. That is the meaning of friendship, of *personal love*: the delight in the good of the other; to be happy because the other is doing well, not because of our control or greed.

“The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face”⁴⁹. It is in the face that I can realize how the Other completely exceeds my powers. And if that encounter is with a child’s face –perhaps because a child still doesn’t wear masks, he cannot hide his joy or his sadness, he is naturally generous to say *thank you*, and he does not have a past and in consequence is full of innocence and hope (Aristotle)–, that experience is even stronger. The foremost example of a non reciprocal responsibility is the responsibility of parents for their helpless infant children, said Jonas⁵⁰. They must be taken care of, but at the same time their eyes (funny, serious, demanding) are telling the parents that they –the children– are not just something passive waiting to be educated, that they are not a belonging: each one of them is a self, not a case. A mother has five children, but really has each one of them.

The experience of *sudden* is manifest “in the expression, particularly in the expression of the eyes; for instance, in that brightness of the eyes that W. Köhler interprets in a very vivid way as the expression of the experience of an ‘Ah!’”⁵¹. The eyes are questioning, and deserve an answer. The *imperative of responsibility* appears with all its strength. The light of that gaze is unpleasant, because I cannot ignore it. The only solution to avoid it is to look away to another side, to remove my gaze, and to reduce the direct question that the Other’s eyes are asking to a generalized question that exceed completely our possibility to offer an answer and clean our hands of any direct responsibility. “I cannot resolve the problem of poverty in Africa. It is an issue for governments, international organization, NGOs, people with time, means and money”. “Ok. But..., can you do anything for this kid –Victor, Eric, Sarah, Elsa...– and perhaps for his family? For instance, can you try to understand why he is begging instead of studying? Can you look at the World with your

49 Levinas, E. (1979), p. 196.

50 Cf. Jonas, H. (1984), IV, 7.

51 Scheller, M. (1994), p. 48.

experience but from his/her perspective, and realize that he/she really deserves a chance, a hand, *your hand?*”.

That attitude is what is called *benevolence*⁵². By it, we take care of the other's interests, and we don't see things in their 'function', but as a 'final end'. Benevolence is *the coming to real of reality for me*. And we can do this specially in the action of *loving*. Nevertheless not all acts of love mean benevolence, but only those when we love someone so as to wish good to him⁵³. And this is the main characteristic of perfect friendship.

By benevolence we are able to affirm reality in itself. Things do not have value because they are related to us. An overturned tortoise needs to be helped back again (we find that responsibility) because it exist to walk. A sticker saying “Think about your wife, drive carefully” has abandoned the centrality of instincts: the reason to taking care is not the fear of the driver's pain or death, but the capacity of taking consciousness of the suffering of the beloved: they shouldn't suffer, they deserve to be happy, and that is enough reason for me to take care of myself. *Benevolence* is the intuition (the vision) of being in the World to love things (and persons) as they deserve to be loved, and of having the responsibility of helping them to fulfill their goals.

The benevolent glance realizes that humans do not simply have 'value', they have 'dignity'. The confusion between 'having' and 'being' is a common place at the end of the Den⁵⁴. The powerful men (with their titles, or millions, or fame) demand for honor, that only is something offered from outside (perhaps just *flattery*), and are considered special people. Nobody wants to accept that the King –most of the times– is naked: honor, appearances, sophistical existence. The King is just another poor fellow, full of insecurities and never sure about the rectitude or integrity of his 'friends'. The idea of dignity has not relation to having. But to wake up to it, to be able to discern it when the Other does not have, or is just hungry or covered by pustules, dust or ignorance, one has to learn how to look.

Our glance has to pass through the layers of the exteriority (the appearance) and arrive to the fact that the other is a subjectivity: “Being is substantiality, being a self, and this grounds all objectivity. The paradigmatic case of

52 Many of the ideas in the next paragraphs are inspired by Spaemann, R (2000), *Happiness and Benevolence*, pp. 92-105.

53 Cf. *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

54 Cf. Marcel, G. (1949); Fromm, E. (1976).

such substantiality is subjectivity. What Aristotle says for substance is valid for subjectivity: Everything else is predicated of it, but it is not predicated of anything else. It is not characteristic of a being. Rather it simply *is*. And precisely in this simple being it is an image; it is the absolute in the manner of an image”⁵⁵. An image of an Absolute because that subject is ‘who is’, in a completely new way, as a novelty in the Universe.

From this fact arises the prohibition of killing, and the banality of murder itself. On killing, as we have already underlined, abstraction plays a key role. It is something that can be done if the victim is stripped of his humanity. But that is not a defect of the victim, but of the killer. The socratic argument in *Gorgias* is completely valid also in this field: only a degenerated human being can accept to kill. The sad defense of Eichmann, as it is told by Hanna Arendt, is a clear prove of it. Eichmann was blind (maybe because he wanted to be blind, maybe because it is the spirit of the *time of bureaucracy*: to obey filling all the boxes in the document). And even when someone kills, the Other can appear as something unforeseeable:

“He thus opposes to me not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first world: ‘you shall not commit murder’”⁵⁶.

He cannot be killed not because of a physical impossibility (to kill can become a routine), but because of a moral one. And that impossibility is born in the experience of the encounter with the other as other (benevolence). This experience depends on ‘to know how to see’. And is realized in the epiphany of the face of the Other. “The epiphany of the face is ethical”⁵⁷. And her command under the form ‘you shall do’ is so strong that many times the executioner has to mask the prisoner to be able to act. This strength of the face (the strength of that epiphany that leads to the condition of image of the unconditional) presupposes a positive moment: war presupposes peace, the fear of killing something holy is born in the holiness of the reality of the Other. And in my own holiness, that makes me *capax rei*, able to recognize my equal. That is why we can say that the killer –the crime against humanity, perpetrated by

55 Spaemann, R. (2000), pp. 95-96.

56 Levinas, E. (1979), p. 199.

57 Levinas, E. (1979).

the fanatic, or by Eichmann or Truman— is responsible for his own blindness: once he was able to see reality, and the power of context is not powerful enough to cancel the ‘beyond nature’ dimension of the Person⁵⁸

We can change the figure of the killed for the poor. The experience is quite similar. You are taking a walk, in your head you deal with your own problems. The World around you is too big and complicated for you to try to mend it. You do good things, you pay your taxes. In your life the balance is well-adjusted. Eventually you can express your disappointment with corruption, and how the Government is not taking care of their tasks: pot holes in the road, dust everywhere, lack of garbage bins and excess of litter.

All on a sudden, someone interrupts the flux of those thoughts. A child, perhaps with a sad look in the eyes, perhaps smiling, stops you in the street and asks you for help: “Hello! Can you give me something to eat?”.

You feel upset: the boy has entered into your privacy, he does not have that right! Let each one mind his business! On the other hand, it is clear that he wears rugs, and that he wouldn’t have to be in the street without his parents (“How old is he?”, you ask yourself, “10?, 12?”). And then you think that probably the parents are using him, because *they* take advantage of their children (“They?, the poor people? Is this because ‘they’ don’t love their children? But, who are ‘they’? Is there such a class, *the poor*, as we say *the lawyers* or *the supporters of this team?*”), and you decide not to give him anything.

Although, suddenly —this is the awakening— you think that it could be true that he has not eaten. And that probably a boy of that age would prefer to play more than to beg. And that he is only a child! You think about your children, your friend’s children, and then you try to put them in that situation. Then, you are still awakening, it is made clear to you that the boy has not chosen the place in which he finds himself. He was born in a poor family. He had no chances: it is what happened. And perhaps (later you will know how much it was true!) his parents had the same problem when they were children: living always in poverty, they have had no chance to escape from it (when you earn less money than what you need to eat, you cannot think about a business, about formation for yourself, about education for the children: poverty is a chain, a prison, a doom). And every morning, when the parents go to struggle

58 Something similar was the central thesis in *Plato’s Gorgias*, about the problem of being victim or unjust.

59 In the case the parents are alive, are not alcoholics, have not left their children...

to get some money to feed the children and to pay the rent⁵⁹, these parents will be ashamed because they are not being able to educate the kids, and they are condemning them to stay forever living in misery. And they know, and now you know, that nobody cares. And it is not their fault.

During the Nazi Regime the Jews and other prisoners were crowded together in trains for many days. They didn't receive any food. They didn't even have water to clean themselves with and there were no lavatories. Most of the time the prisoners had stomach problems. And some of them died during the transportation. When they arrived to their destination their keepers could use the smell of the prisoners, as well as their general aspect, to humiliate them: "Don't you see how you are an inferior race? You all smell like animals!". And those prisoners could feel these assertions as true. But no, it was not their fault.

Who chooses to live in poverty? Who chooses just to survive? But our imagination, the superficial knowledge by which we catalogue reality in order to make it simple and demarcated for us, moves us to think that their situation is the fruit of an election, or of a sin. The benevolent attitude invites you to try to be in the shoes of the Other: how would be my life if...? And the gaps can be easily filled: if my children would have to beg?, if my salary were lower than 2 \$ per day?, if we had to buy the water and wouldn't have either a pit latrine?, if the diet for my children was systematically poor?, if I couldn't afford their education and there were no public options?, if my house were a shanty built with mud and corrugated steel, 10 meter square big?, if my neighborhood was dominated by thugs and violence and my children had seen dead people on their way back home?. And so on.

And, how would I like to be the reaction of the people that I meet? A reaction of rejection? A reaction of indifference? A reaction of disdain? (the *magical thought*, that invites us to think that the person who suffers need to have done something wrong, and we suppose that we are superior: "Who sinned?, he or his parents?"). Would we prefer a reaction of welcoming? At least of respect?

Benevolence: "What hides itself behind this paradox is what we have described as the 'awakening to reality'. The ego caught up in the instincts has not discovered the self or the other. (...) In the act of awakening to reason, its own reality and that of the other become simultaneously visible. The self manifestation of the reality of the other has the same meaning as the complete realization of this reality as a teleological term, of the reality of a being-out-for. Only in this complete realization does the other become real for us, since, so

long as they seem to us to be simply there, they are not for us what they ‘themselves’ are. We can only know what it means to be a self through the fact that we live a self, and therefore have instinct but at the same time go out of our centrality and perceive ourselves as the other of the other, and the other as *alter ego*”⁶⁰.

All these thoughts come in of a sudden. Or maybe little by little: the first thought has been the seed for the others. They have been triggered by one experience: the smiling face of a boy asking for food. This has opened the vital horizon in which he (and millions of people like him) are living. Epiphany, dazzle, the impossibility of indifference: that is the meaning of awakening, and it always ends with a moral question: ‘What shall I do?, what must I do?’

V. RESPONSIBILITY

The question of moral responsibility arises to the conscience. “What must I do?”. The same happens with some doubts: we have just said that there are million of people living like them. So, how can I help? They are too many! Do I have to choose my objectives? Under which criteria?

Someone could decide to pay school fees. Must he do it only to the most brilliant students? Can a child be brilliant at 7 or 8? Can we demand him to be brilliant at 16 if at 8 he was not able to go to school? What do we do with those who are neither lazy nor brilliant? Am I asking them more than I asked myself when I was 16 because I was not poor? Or, what do we do with the kids with learning difficulties?

A similar example: someone could decide to pay medical fees. Under which criteria? Only for brilliant people? Only for curable people? Under which conditions? Only if they adapt themselves to some Western politics (for instance, control of population)? Can’t we provide medical care and let them live their lives? Isn’t it the only ethical answer that “there are not conditions at all”, “I cannot play God”? Supposing we were in their shoes, would we want any kind of colonialism in exchange of help? Some people seem to mistake the fight against destitution with the elimination of poor people: “If they would not exist, the problem would eventually be solved”.

“Contrary to the Kantian narrowing of ethics, it must be said that it is not the demand for impartiality which is the basis of all moral decisions, but

60 Spaemann, R. (2000), p. 98.

rather that it is the perception of the reality of the other and even of one's own self". You cannot be impartial when in each case you face an absolute. It does not matter who is the beneficiary, because each one deserves to be helped: in their glance you meet the commitment with the great assertion: "Help me! At least, help mine!". "The real recognition of the real is irrevocable. It cannot be divorced from faithfulness. It is not by accident that the Hebrew word for truth is the same word for faithfulness"⁶¹. Faithfulness in the sense in which one loves the good of a friend, and promotes his personality, and one is happy with this. "The affirmation of the reality of being a self is a free act. It is identical with benevolence". One takes the decision of opening his eyes and letting the other be who he is. The lover will take care (benevolence cannot be a 'pure love' without a heart of mercy, benevolence cannot be just kindness, 'good manners'), but will not impose the 'interest' or 'desire' of his feelings or tendencies on the other.

"The real is perceived as itself only when it is perceived as a project. Only in the 'benevolent' accompanying of this project do I realize its reality". This is the classical idea of friendship: a relation in which each of the friends are looking for the good of the other, and they enjoy being together, building one common dialogue that lasts for the life.

"What can be more delightful than to have someone to whom you can say everything with the same absolute confidence as to yourself? Is not prosperity robbed of half of its value if you have no one to share your joy with? On the other hand, misfortunes would be hard to bear if there was no one to feel them even more acutely than yourself. (...) In the face of a true friend a man sees as it were *a second self*. So that where his friend is, he is; if his friend be rich, he is not poor; though he be weak, his friend's strength is his; and in his friend's life he enjoys a second life after his own is finished"⁶².

To expand the narrow circle of our own life, to share, to affirm the reality of the Other as other me, as *alter ego*.

Then, isn't that personalistic approach to cooperation, is a selective way of action? Of course: that is in the nature of love and compassion. We have not God's omnipotency. We are just His image! Nevertheless, that is also the nature of the human *ordo amoris*. There is a famous passage in the Gospel: Jesus and the widow of Nain⁶³. Jesus, the Christians say, was true God and true

61 Spaemann, R. (2000), pp. 99-100.

62 Cicero, *On Friendship*, VII.

63 Cf. Luke 7, 11-17.

Man. When he saw that woman following the burial entourage of her son, “he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep”. Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother”.

Jesus raised the dead young man to life moved by the suffering of the mother. One can think: how many widows were suffering something similar by that time?, why only that man?, why –if Jesus was God– not all the dead men in the History of the World? And the answer, with that dimension of mystery that appears in all the actions of Christ, is quite simple: “he had compassion for her”, he got in her shoes, he carried out an act of *benevolence*. Probably to rise all the dead people of that year in the world was within his powers (if He is God, and there is going to be a final resurrection, and God has created from nothing, etc., it seems not to be a very impressive issue). But probably it wouldn’t have been the answer to the general problem of salvation: that raising back to life of this young man, Lazarus, the whole humanity, was only temporary. The point here was *the mother*, not the *young man*. And to do good to her He didn’t need to resolve in that moment the mystery of human mortality.

“I cannot resolve the problem of poverty in Africa”. Who can? But perhaps you can cooperate with *this man* by your side to resolve (even partially) the problem of poverty in his life, in his family. “But in his slum there are one million people! It wouldn’t be fair if I only help him”. But then the answer would be not to ever help anyone. And your wealth in front of so many poor would be even more unfair. How can be fair to have if the others don’t have?

We are not God, and we don’t have the responsibility of solving all the problems in this world and of making of it a perfect one⁶⁴. “The good of the whole universe is that which is apprehended by God, Who is the Maker and Governor of all things: hence whatever He wills, He wills it under the aspect of the common good; this is His own Goodness, which is the good of the whole universe. On the other hand, the apprehension of a creature, according to its nature, is of some particular good, proportionate to that nature. Now a thing may happen to be good under a particular aspect, and yet not good

64 All the attempts to do that have ended in a disaster: the immanent salvation of the Totalitarisms can be tagged as the greatest crime against Humanity ever. In a lower escale, cf. Stephan Zweig, *Castellio contra Calvino*.

65 *Summa Theologica*, I-II 19, a.10.

under a universal aspect, or vice versa". And that is the reason why "it is customary to say that a man's will, in this respect, is conformed to the Divine will, because it wills what God wishes him to will"⁶⁵.

We have our own field of responsibility. It is smaller than the Universe; it is smaller than 'poverty' as such. Our responsibility begins with our fellow men, with ours fellow men. Only God has as a goal the *bonum totius universi* (the good of the whole Universe). It is different what God loves, and what God wants us to love. If we wait to act to the possibility of solving all possible problems, we shall remain still. If we struggle to get the best of all the possible worlds, we will make violence to this world and to the people who dwell in it. "All human kind" is not a real subject of love: the Modern Ideals ('liberty, equality, fraternity'), as were announced and defended by the French Revolution, become the excuse to forget and mistreat the neighbor. In them love does not become real.

Love is a relation from 'me' to 'you': two glances in reciprocity. It is not in the big numbers. Friendship is something *exclusive*, open only to a few. The same happens with the family, and with the marital love. The reason may be that this is the way Man has to love: one by one. Our condition is finitude. And, as we are not God, we only arrive to a limited number of problems or people. And –as happens with virtue– by growing in the exercise of loving, the heart can be spread to more and more.

If we try to live in the 'universal love', we will lose the 'detail', the particular context, the face and culture of the person we say we try to help. If we remove the particular details (and reduce cooperation to giving computers for all the students, electricity for all the houses, or food programs, that invite passivity) we are helping 'the humans', but not 'the people'. Benevolence has a lot to do with contingency: it happens that my friend is *this man* and not the other; it happens that someone cannot become a friend as the consequence of a task. "Those who quickly show the marks of friendship to each other wish to be friends, but are not friends unless they both are lovable and know the fact; for a wish for friendship may arise quickly, but friendship does not"⁶⁶. Friendship lies beyond the standards of justice, and is not a burden or an obligation, but a gift, a free choice. Nevertheless, at the same time, friendship is the peak of ethics in Aristotle: not a norm, not an obligation of justice, but a donation. And that donation is the best realization of justice⁶⁷.

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Nic Eth* VIII.

⁶⁷ Cf. Spaemann, R. (2000), p. 110.

That is the reason why cooperation, and solidarity, cannot be built only by statistics, in a *macroeconomic* way. We are not dealing with numbers, or things, but with person. As a consequence, there is a *narrative dimension* in cooperation that, on the one side, invites to know the Other story and, on the other, tries not to make him become an object of curiosity (that would go against benevolence, because in curiosity the beneficiary is the self, the *desire to feel*).

By knowing the other (the face, the circumstances, how he or she is doing, their drama too), abstraction can be overcome. Now you are not just giving money for a cause, but in order to push to do something a ‘friend’, or a person that I already know. If the beneficiary knows the benefactor, he will be able to overcome his own bias, and he will pass from the initial lack of confidence to the joy of becoming someone to someone, perhaps for the first time in his whole life. Today’s social networks are making this perspective a real possibility: the information of one person can reach the other side of the world ‘just on time’.

To ‘awake to reality’ is to become a kind of friends. That changes the meaning of cooperation. All of us have to recognize that we cannot do everything by ourselves. Sometimes we really need help (an advice, a reprimand, economical support, just someone seated beside us), and we do not feel ashamed because of our weakness: we are humans. What we are asking for is for the help of a friend: a person without hurry, just busy in loving us by ourselves.

Aquinas, inspired by Aristotle, gives us the reason: “Just as nature does not fail man in necessities, although it has not provided him with weapons and clothing, as it provided other animals, because it gave him reason and hands, with which he is able to get these things for himself; so neither did it fail man in things necessary, although it gave him not the wherewithal to attain Happiness: since this it could not do. But *it did give him free-will, with which he can turn to God, that He may make him happy. ‘For what we do by means of our friends, is done, in a sense, by ourselves’* (*Ethic.* iii, 3)”⁶⁸.

Material poverty is not the main problem: an excess of goods, the Western materialism, can be worse –in terms of happiness and personal realization– than lack of cars or poor housing. Spiritual poverty is lived in terms of soli-

68 *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 5, a. 5, ad 1st.

tude, of lack of friendship. Poverty in the Third World is not always dissociated from joy. “Ever since the Old Testament, God has been with the poor; and Sacred Scripture unceasingly acclaims ‘the poor of Yahweh’. A poor person feels dependent on God; this bond is the foundation of his spirituality. The world has not favored him, but all his hope, his sole light, is in God. (...) The poor person is someone who knows that, by himself, he cannot live. He needs God and other people in order to be, flourish and grow. On the contrary, rich people expect nothing of anyone. They can provide for their needs without calling either on their neighbors or on God. In this sense, wealth can lead to great sadness and true human loneliness or to terrible spiritual poverty. If in order to eat and care for himself, a man must turn to someone else, this necessarily results in a great enlargement of his heart. This is why the poor are closest to God and live in great solidarity with one another; they draw from this divine source the ability to be attentive to others”⁶⁹.

But living against the limit goes against the human dignity: they don’t have a world in their societies, they don’t have assistance, they are used by the powerful. But they can be healed, not by paternalism, but by friendship: “what we do by means of our friends, is done, in a sense, by ourselves”. Friendship is the best way for personal development. However, to become friends people need to overcome the barriers of anonymity, they (we) need to learn how to see. The transcendental dimension of the person (each person as an image of the Three Persons that God is) makes here its dazzling appearance.

With the same sense, Saint Josemaría Escrivá liked to say: “Do you know why I love you so much? Because I see boiling in you the Blood of Christ”⁷⁰. Is this not a good reason (‘the reason’) to take care of the needy people?

⁶⁹ Sarah, R. C. (2015), pp. 140-141.

⁷⁰ Cf. Aranda, A. (2000), p. 304.

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RECENSIONES

