

Prompted by the important realization that the worst evil may come from those who are determined to pursue absolute good, there are certain obvious deductions that need to be made. First, that those intent on doing good are also frequently in good faith. Hitler may well have been in good faith! Clearly, good faith cannot be a criterion for judgement; in our everyday dealings, even when we lie, we all know how easy it is to put a series of self-justification mechanisms in place, just like totalitarian regimes do. If, as Salvatore Natoli says, we should talk about facts and not intentions when considering the deeds of the Righteous, we can see that good intentions are commonplace, while responsibility for facts is much less so.

The opening page of Primo Levi's "The Truce" contains a sort of identikit of a Righteous person. It is the testimony of 27 January [1945] – the date later chosen for the Holocaust Remembrance Day – when four Russian horsemen appeared at the gates of Auschwitz:

"To us they looked amazingly corporeal and real, suspended – because the road was higher than the camp – on their enormous horses between the grey of the snow and the grey of the sky, immobile in the wind that blew in damp gusts, threatening a thaw. They neither greeted us, nor smiled; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a bewildered restraint that sealed their lips and fixed their eyes on the funereal scene. It was the same sense of shame we felt ourselves, the shame that overcame us after the selections, and every time we were forced to watch or submit to an outrage: the shame the Germans did not feel, the shame that a righteous person feels when faced with another man's crime; the feeling of guilt that such a crime should even exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that do exist, and that his own will for good had proved too weak or ineffective, and had not prevailed in defence"<sup>1</sup>.

Shame is a key aspect of our reflections on the Righteous. A righteous person feels shame for an offence committed by *another*, and yet this *other* is still a human being. Inherent in this shame is the fact that you can identify with the persecutor and that the persecutor does not belong to a different species from you; in addition, you feel you have not done enough and that at least a share of the responsibility falls on you (the risk inherent in this situation is excessive self blame). We feel ashamed in less extreme cases too, when, for example, we witness instances of road rage and lack the courage to intervene. We feel ashamed and this means that implicitly we have an opinion about what is right and what is not right.

It is difficult to examine the principles according to which we classify an action as bad, also because they are subject to constant change in time. There is no doubt that mechanisms of violence generally tend to disrupt the spontaneous kinship we feel for our fellows. In death camps, human beings are de-humanized to such an extent that killing them becomes easy, precisely because their persecutors can no longer identify with them. Reducing men to human larvae is a regular feature of exterminations and one that facilitates the task of the executioners.

"Racistization" and "ethnicism" are indispensable mechanisms for violence since they are theoretical and ideologized forms of detaching shame from any feeling of human kinship; by turning 'others' into a different species, it is easier to annihilate them. In all this there is nevertheless an ideal of a human being that remains widely implicit, but which it would be necessary to probe or at least to posit as a problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo. La Tregua*, Einaudi tascabili, Torino 1989, pag. 158

Aristotelian philosophy makes constant reference to man as a social animal, to the happiness of the political community and the relational factor always returns.

In Jewish culture the debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ben Azai about which is the most important verse of the Torah highlights two principles that clash and create “areas of turbulence” in our thinking. Rabbi Akiva points to the verse “you shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus,19,18), in actual fact better translated as “you shall wish for your neighbour what you wish for yourself”; whereas Rabbi Ben Azai indicates the verse “these are the generations of Adam” (Genesis 5,1).

Rabbi Akiva affirms that we should start from ourselves: knowing how much we want from life, we extend the things we want for ourselves to our neighbour. But for Ben Azai, the starting point is the paradigm of mankind, the generations of Adam: we are all part of the human “kind” descended from Adam and Eve. Rabbi Akiva refers to something very concrete: “Take for example how much you want for yourself, your wishes, your needs, your aspirations, your hopes, and be aware that these are things that are also important for your neighbour; expand this consideration outwards from this centre that is you”. Ben Azai inverts this position: “Take the universal aspect of humankind, understand the relationship that unites all human beings, and try to consider the consequences of this kinship, of the shame you would feel when a human being, who should be the image of God, becomes a victim. These are two different principles that effectively create areas of turbulence with one another. Rabbi Akiva’s ‘love your neighbour’ principle allows a host of nationalists to love their neighbours just as far as the border, and then to justify exterminating the others. Very often people hate their neighbour, not their neighbour, their ultra neighbour, in order to love their neighbour more. Racists say: “I have to love all those that I consider members of my race, and to reinforce this love, I hate all those who don’t belong. There is effectively hate that nourishes love. The same thing happens in sectarianism: sectarians love all those that belong to their sect or religion and to reinforce this love, they hate anyone from another sector or religion. So human sequences are continually disrupted. A man who is dissolute in private could be very virtuous in public.

Cioran defined poets as armchair adventurers. Thanks to or in spite of the armchair, we may wonder. We are constantly having to reckon with gaps, with broken sequences. Deep-rooted love for family can lead to a mafioso spirit. Continual reversals are what make it hard for us to act, make choices and even theorize. We are not in consistent sequences, we constantly find ourselves in fields of tension. If we did not understand the need for a partly selfish love for ourselves, we would not understand what others want, because others have their own selfish field. If, on the other hand, we failed to project our imagination to consider what a human being is, we would not manage to extend the confines of kinship. There are times when we accentuate kinship, other times universalization, according to the power of our imagination, our desire to understand the human in all its expressions. Sometimes, for self-preservation, we limit our imagination or even fail to set it in motion and in this way we fail to grasp the human paradigm, to define the problems. Among the fields of turbulence we could include, for example, the drama of Socrates when faced with obedience to the law. Intellectual activity consists precisely of defining these fields of tension in which we find ourselves, case by case. If we pretend that they are fields of consistency we lose sight of the real situation. Rabbi Akiva’s principle – which also emerges from other concrete situations that came under discussion (the two thirsty people in the desert with a water flask only big enough for one) – consists of always starting from oneself, from a strong sense of self (a principle taken up by Hannah Arendt), from the awareness of our good and bad mechanisms, not to run the risk of coming to crimogenous convictions of absolute good. If you understand the mixture of good and bad that defines us, you will manage to understand your fellow men, to be lenient with them. If, on the other hand, you address yourself totally and

presumptuously to your fellow men, you will not be able to understand them, having failed to understand yourself. In the Talmudic treatise of the Sabbath (31 a), we read: "Whatever you hate to have done unto you, do not do to your neighbour". In positive terms: "do as you would be done by." Throughout history, imposing good on your neighbour because you believe it is for his own good, this extreme goodness, has led to enormous sufferings. It would be wiser to combine the negative formulation of "not doing to others ..." with the positivity of the verse "wish for your neighbour what you wish for yourself", the one restrains the other.

In rabbinic tradition there are numerous common sense guidelines for the social and human spheres that can be assessed with human criteria, but which at the same time are divine commandments: a dual dimension, that of the need to understand the commandment, above all if it is an ethical and non-ritual commandment, and the voice of God, "I am the Lord your God". Two sources for the road to follow, the recognizability of the human and the divine commandment and two sides on which to be accountable, the human side and the divine side. In strictly religious terms, who are the righteous? Those who respect man's pact with God (which involves seven precepts) and Israel's pact with God (613 precepts). The two sources, human recognizability and divine precept, recall the two positions of Rabbi Akiva and of Rabbi Ben Azai: Akiva tells us to wish for our neighbours the same rights we wish for ourselves, and this is recognizable in human terms, whereas Ben Azai, in the verse about the descendents of Adam, gives us something that could be likened to a divine commandment. This dual dimension is fundamental for lay people too. It should be underlined that the golden rule of "Whatever you hate to have done unto you, do not do to your neighbour", does not allude to God, it simply says something self justifying; like the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, it rests on itself, it is self-founding: by loving myself, I lay the foundations for having a positive relationship with my fellows.

The Righteous are those that not only think that they should wish for their fellows what they wish for themselves, but that have enough imagination to extend the confines of kinship.

It is also worth proposing a reflection on the difference between ethics and law.

Law understood as a system of legal justice alludes to the responsibility that each of us has as regards the community, the social sphere, the people. In ethics, on the other hand, we are responsible for our fellows. There is an inversion of subject and object. The law may even clash with ethics. This is what happens with racial laws, laws that go against my moral principles and which I consider unjust. So I will try to support the victims of these laws, I will shoulder my responsibilities against the law. Dipping once again into biblical wisdom, I recall a passage (Exodus 23 ) that refers to ethical behaviour towards strangers:

"You shall not oppress a stranger because you know his Nefesh, his state of mind, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (1.56).

Mobilize memory, re-evoke your own experience and that of past generations, recognize the stranger's humiliated state of mind, his Nefesh, not only his material condition. You are in your own land, you are not a foreigner and you are in an asymmetric relationship with the other, who is a foreigner: that is where the sense of justice is measured. To know yourself, to successfully recognize the human paradigm in your fellow, Adam in your fellow, you have to dig into your memory. Memory thus determines moral choices. Your human essence has a historic dimension. In conclusion, the political but also the existential experience of being strangers is peculiar to human beings. Any child that comes into the world is a stranger. We are strangers when we are born, we are received into a world that is not yet ours, is not familiar to us. Our family members make that world familiar to us, they remove the fears from this unknown world that we are entering. In fact, if we consider our education, historic stratification, our existential nature, we can strengthen that imagination required to extend the confines of our fellowship. This is the moral

basis of memory.