

From bystander to actor

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Stanley Cohen's great merit was to bring together, as two variants of the same phenomenon and the same quandary, the two kinds of wrongdoing seldom met in scholarly analyses, though in real life they never stay far away from each other for long and most of the time seek each other's warm and salutary embrace. The first is 'doing evil'; the second refraining from preventing or opposing evil being done (Cohen 2001).

It has been and remains customary to examine and analyse 'doing evil' – inflicting pain and suffering, or commanding others to do it – under the rubric of 'perpetrators'. It was a foregone conclusion that doing evil is causally related to certain peculiar ('natural' or 'nurtured') characteristics of the evil-doers or equally peculiar settings (again, either 'natural', as in Hobbes's pre-social men's *bellum omnium contra omnes*, or artificially designed with evil intentions or evil, albeit unanticipated, consequences), in which the prospective evil-doers have been placed only partly, if at all, by their choice.

It has been also customary to examine and analyse the absence of resistance and opposition to evil on the part of those who having caused no pain or suffering by their own actions, saw the evil being done (or knew that evil was being done or was about to be done), under the rubric of 'bystanders'. It was an integral part of the 'bystanders' definition, indeed one of their principal defining features, not to be among the perpetrators. The classic triangle of roles played in the course of evildoing separated the bystanders from the perpetrators no less radically than it set them apart from the victims.

Distinguishing the bystanders from the perpetrators may make a lot of legal (or, more generally, institutionally warranted) sense. Indeed, underlying the distinction is the vital difference between actions punishable by *law* and actions (or inaction) unnamed in the legal code and therefore incurring 'merely' the *moral* guilt and the opprobrium such guilt invites. Whatever may be wrong about the passive witness or the bystander's stance is different from the wrong that results from the perpetrator's actions, and it is the presence or the absence of legal prohibition that makes the difference. Drawing the line between the two reprehensible roles in the evil act, let alone drawing the line unambiguously and in undisputed fashion, would be a hopeless endeavour from the start were the moral condemnation of evildoing, rather than the penal retribution it attracts or not, lead in the pencil. But even when the common habit of awarding authority to the letter of law rather than to inarticulate and ineffable moral sentiments is obediently followed, a wide and hotly contested area tends to be found between the undisputed *crime* of perpetration and regrettable, yet excusable and forgivable *misdeed* of 'bystanding'. In that grey area bystanders confront the risk of becoming accessories to the devil and turning into perpetrators. The place and time when the sinister avatar occurs is, however, exceedingly difficult to pinpoint, let alone to locate in advance, fence off and surround with warning signs.

The habit of analytically separating the crime of commission ascribed to the perpetrators from the sins of omission attributed to bystanders can be challenged and faulted on

other counts as well. If perpetrators and bystanders are made to reside in universes of their own, framed by the separate and self-sustained scholarly discourses (usually, by criminology in the case of perpetrators and ethics in the case of bystanders) with few if any shared points, the analysts, inevitably, will tend to generate separate conceptual networks and explanatory schemes for each of the two categories. They will tend to constitute perpetrators and bystanders as distinct categories with psychological characteristics and social locations all of their own. Once initiated, the separation will acquire its own momentum and vigour. Inquiries will proceed in two increasingly diverging directions, multiplying the indices of distinctiveness while rendering the discovery and mapping of the ground common to both progressively more difficult.

And yet there is an affinity between 'doing evil' and 'non-resistance to evil' – much closer and more intimate than the scholars engrossed in the exploration of one but neglecting the other would notice and admit. Such affinity would be plainly visible to an unarmed and untrained eye (if the idea of an innocent eye held in our times any water). Blindness to affinity is induced and contrived. This blindness is a by-product, or side effect, of the thorough institutionalization of the distinction between socially prescribed strategies, deployed respectively in the treatment of those named by the law and those of whom laws keep silent. It took a lot of effort to set the two categories apart. It needs even more effort to bring them together again.

Such an effort has been undertaken by Stanley Cohen, and to remarkable effect. Cohen blazed the trail through the dense thicket of institutional choices and their ideological glosses to lay bare the painstakingly concealed, barely visible common ground on which the perpetrators and the passive witnesses of evil meet. That common ground is, in Cohen's vocabulary, *denial* – a term whose 'conceptual ambiguities', by his own admission, 'are gross', but which despite his efforts he could not adequately replace by any other term. Denial is what makes *both* the perpetration of evil and refraining from reaction to evil psychologically and sociologically feasible; it is of them both an indispensable condition and principal instrument.

'Denial' is the answer to the vexing questions 'what do we do with our knowledge about the suffering of others, and what does this knowledge do to us?' – the questions that arise whenever 'people, organizations, governments or whole societies are presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged. The information is therefore somehow repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted' (Cohen 2001: X, 1)

We may say that those who perpetrate evil and those who see evil, hear evil, but do nothing about it, are confronting a classical case of Leon Festinger's 'cognitive dissonance': the necessity to hold simultaneously two contradictory and incompatible views. Both are constantly exposed to the possibility that their actions (or passivity) might be held against them, having been declared iniquitous, execrable and calling for punishment. In the incurably polyphonic world of 'liquid modernity', in which values and truths are anything but absolute and are unlikely to be universally accepted as absolute, the justification of committed actions or inactivity is no more solidly grounded than their condemnation. The perpetrators and the bystanders alike feel therefore, poignantly and constantly, the need of emphatic and vociferous denial. That need would never go away and allows no pause, nor a momentary lapse of vigilance. Dismissing, even playing down, the potential threat of devastating charges is hardly a feasible option, unless the accused can count on their superiority over the accusers as being formidable enough to render the accusations if not irrelevant, then (what truly matters) devoid of practical consequences.

There are many forms of the denial of guilt (or pretension of innocence, which amounts

to the same) but the arguments used are astoundingly similar. Denial has a two-tier structure (lack of knowledge, and lack of opportunity to act on knowledge), which can easily accommodate all the variety of most commonly used arguments. Scrapped of embellishments, all arguments reveal one or another of the two patterns: 'I did not know' or 'I could not do'. The first – a straightforward, unthinking, almost offhand response to the cognitive dissonance is 'I (we) did not know' (that some people suffered; that the pain was inflicted by others; that such horrifying things happened at the far end of the chain of actions of which my action was but one of many links). If the argument from ignorance loses credibility, the argument from impotence comes to the rescue (I had no choice, since the alternative to doing nothing was too horrible to contemplate; besides, nothing would've changed whatever I've done or refrained from doing – the odds against preventing/repairing the evil-doings were overwhelming).

In the era of information highways the arguments from ignorance are fast losing their credibility. Information on other people's suffering, conveyed in a most vivid and easily legible form, is instantly available almost everywhere (once the access to the world-wide web of information highways stopped requiring even the nearness of a telephone socket – distance is no longer an excuse). This has two consequences that posit ethical quandaries of unprecedented gravity.

The first: 'bystanding' is no more the exceptional plight of the few. We all are bystanders now – witnesses to the pain-inflicting and the human suffering it causes.

The second: We all confront (even if we don't feel) the need for exculpation and self-justification. Few if any people need not resort at one time or another to the expedient of guilt-denial.

Let us note that in the age of universal accessibility and instantaneity of information the 'I did not know' type of excuse *adds to the guilt* rather than absolves from sin. It carries a connotation of 'selfishly, for peace of mind's sake, I refused to be bothered', rather than of 'the truth has been guilefully hidden from me'. In the age of confessions, when the public sphere is increasingly used as the showcase for displaying the most private intimacies, *any* hiding of *any* information is seen as an offence and prompts resentment. By proxy, absorbing the information on offer, attention and retention, 'being in the know', joining the latest talk of the town becomes a virtue. Lack of interest, indifference to information, ignorance of the latest buzz-words and buzz-issues, not being *au courant* with the flow of the news, are on the other hand causes of shame. Almost any talks entered into these days are talks of the town (or conducted in their style even if ostensibly having private matters for the subject matter), and few talks of the town can be ignored in any talks. The 'I did not know' is, purely and simply, out of tune with the spirit of the time.

What remains, then, the last-resort excuse is 'I could not do anything' or 'I could do no more than I've done'. These days, it becomes indeed the most *popular* excuse of the bystanders and perhaps the only *viable* strategy of denial at the bystanders' disposal.

The 'There was nothing I could do except what I did do' stratagem dissolves the punishable guilt of evil-doing in the universal and for that reason unpunishable even if regrettable plight of 'bystanding'. In the world of global interdependency the difference between the bystander and a co-perpetrator, an accomplice or accessory to evil-doing becomes increasingly tenuous. Responsibility for human misfortune, however distant the misery may be from its witnesses, can hardly be denied – at least, not with any degree of conviction. At no time therefore was the demand for ever new, ever more inventive and refined variants of 'there was nothing I could do' type of responsibility-denial as great and quickly rising as it is today.

Being a bystander in the world of global dependency

Psychologist Petrůska Clarkson (1996) offers a straightforward, commonsense-friendly definition of the bystander: 'A bystander is a descriptive name given to a person who does not become actively involved in a situation where someone else requires help'. Examples follow, meant to clarify the meaning further: 'It is bystanding to be witness to, but not to confront, a racist, misogynist or homophobic joke. Letting a friend drive while drunk is bystanding. It is also bystanding . . . not to confront or to get help to deal with a colleague whom you personally believe to be disabled or impaired, for example, due to stress, burnout or addiction.' Clarkson is also a poet, and so unlike most other psychologists can send warm human blood running through the veins of cold definitions – as in a poem called 'Killing of Kindness':

There is an old man near you or a young woman, a child or a baby, a dog, a friend
or a place,
Absorbing the violence, the viciousness, the vileness and the vice and someone is
standing by
Passively looking, merely observing, inwardly cringing, finding good reasons for not
engaging,
Estrangely ever from feeling the kindness, our human kindness, the sameness of
being and pain

Making offensive and humiliating jokes is the joker's decision; driving after one drink too many has been the friend's own choice; the colleague has probably brought the trouble upon herself by her own misconduct or imprudence. The 'bystander' was not responsible for such choices made by others before her eyes, and even less for the chain of past choices that have led to the present condition with no good choice – not legally, physically or spiritually; bystanders are 'not *really*' responsible for the horrors they witness. Of that guilt, the bystander is *innocent*. But, Clarkson insists, *innocence is no excuse* for sitting put and refusing to move a finger (the bystander's guilt is that other sin: the sin of inaction). And yet, aware that this is exactly how the argument from innocence is commonly deployed, in human practices as much as in their theoretical glosses – as an excuse, self-justification, proof of righteousness – Clarkson risks bold indictment only in the other capacity of the poet . . .

Let us note, though, that the extent of the bystander's responsibility and thus the issue of the bystander's degree of innocence is hardly ever an open-and-shut case. In most instances it remains a moot question, bound to provoke no end of contention. The causal links can be reconstructed in more than one way, and just how small needs to be the contribution of one or another factor to be declared truly insignificant or to be considered a difference that makes no difference is a matter of judgment rather than of fact.

There are other doubts, yet more fundamental and yet more resistant to final proofs and ultimate solutions. Would the perpetrators – the 'real culprits' – engage in their evil deeds if they could not count on the indifference and non-interference of all those around? If they did not know for sure or at least had good reasons to believe that the witnesses were not likely to turn into actors? If they could not hope that however strong were to be the disgust and indignation their deeds arouse in witnesses it would not be reformed into loud protest, let alone active resistance?

To cut a long story short, a strong case can be made for the bystanders' guilt – at least guilt by *omission*. Refraining from action carries a causal load not much lighter than acting, while the certainty (or high probability) of general non-resistance by the non-lookers may

carry a heavier responsibility for the ill actions and their effects than the mere presence of a number of ill-intentioned villains. Last but by no account least: no *legally* proper and binding verdict of innocence has the power to absolve, let alone to redeem the defendant from *moral* guilt.

Keith Tester (1997) elaborates on Karl Jaspers's inventory of the types of guilt in which *moral* guilt (of which the culprits with moral conscience, such as are 'given to repentance', are aware) is set apart from the *metaphysical* guilt. The latter, in Jaspers's view, stretches 'beyond morally meaningful duty'. Metaphysical guilt occurs whenever human solidarity has stopped short of its absolute, indeed infinite, limits. Unlike the moral guilt, the metaphysical guilt does not require proof, or even a suspicion, of the causal link between the action (or inaction) of the supposed culprit and the case of human suffering. In the metaphysical sense, I am guilty whether or not I've contributed, deliberately or inadvertently, to the pain suffered by another human being.

Emmanuel Levinas would perhaps incorporate Jaspers's 'metaphysical guilt' into the category of moral guilt as such. For Jaspers the absence of causal connection between the culprit's conduct and the sufferer's pain was not potent enough to efface guilt, and this because the postulate of *absolute human solidarity* was the foundation stone of all morality and undetachable from moral stance. For Levinas, what made the presence or the absence of causal connection irrelevant was the postulated *unconditionality of human responsibility for the Other*.

Levinas and Jaspers may cut their categories differently but the resulting disagreement is mostly terminological. In both cases, the terms are sought to convey the essential distinction between the realm inhabited by *legal subjects* and the universe of *moral self*. The cause-and-effect link, the principal *differentia specifica* of Jaspers's categorization, is devoid of potency and assigned but secondary significance in Levinas's.

Dethronement of causality and the endowment of inter-human solidarity and responsibility with the power to dismiss all ontological argument might have been the constitutive feature of the moral self – indeed, its transcendental prerequisite – at all times. In the era of globalization, however, the longstanding dispute between ethics and ontology loses much of its past sharpness, together with its subject matter. In our world of universal interdependency the realms of the causes and effects of human action, and the scope of humanity, overlap. Virtually no human action, however locally confined and compressed, can be certain to have no consequence for the lot of the rest of mankind. Nor can the lot of any segment of humanity be self-contained and depend in its entirety on the actions of its members alone.

Commenting on the memorable 1979 intervention of Edward's Lorenz under a title that has become since one of the best known phrases coined in the past century (Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?), Roberto Toscano (2001: 73) suggests that 'today the fact of global interconnectedness demands, in international relations, ethical standards that go beyond a strict, legalistic concept of responsibility. The butterfly does not *know* about the consequences of the flapping of wings; but the butterfly cannot *rule out* that consequence. We move from responsibility to a related but more restrictive concept: that of precaution.'

While retaining its eternal function of giving birth and life-sustaining nourishment to the moral self, 'responsibility for the Other', a fully and truly *unconditional* responsibility, which now includes as well the duty of prevision and precaution, becomes in our times the 'brute fact' of the human condition. Whether or not we recognize and willingly *assume* responsibility for each other, we already *bear* it, and there is little or nothing at all we can do to shake it off our shoulders. Five per cent of the planet's population may emit forty per cent of the planet's pollutants and use/waste half or more of the planet's resources, and

they may resort to military and financial blackmail to defend tooth and nail their right to go on doing so. They may, for the foreseeable future, use their superior force to make the victims pay the costs of their victimization (were not the Jews under Nazis obliged to pay their train fares on the way to Auschwitz?). And yet responsibility is theirs – not just in any abstractly philosophical, metaphysical or ethical sense but in the down to earth, mundane, straightforward, causal (ontological, if you wish) meaning of the word.

Excursus: what can we learn from the story of ‘animal rights’ Our responsibility extends now to ‘humanity’ as a whole. The question of coexistence (of ‘mutually assured survival’) has stretched far beyond the problem of good-neighbourly relations and peaceful cohabitation with people on the other side of the state border, to which it was confined for most of human history. It involves now the human population of *the earth* – those already alive and those yet to be born. The factual, if not the recognized and the assumed responsibility, has already reached the limits of humanity – but the odds are that it won’t stop even there for long. The *full*, wholehearted acceptance of the humanity of ‘savages’, ‘aborigines’, ‘tribesmen’, ‘travellers’ and other varieties of half-humans, not-fully humans or the not-really humans, may still remain an ‘unfinished project’, but the roll-call of the beings yet to be admitted into ‘humanity’ (that is, as objects of ethical concerns and moral responsibilities) expands as quickly, perhaps faster yet, than the list of those already given a residence permit. The growing popularity of the ‘declarations of rights of animals *as* living beings’ – like the widely read studies of Frans de Waal, Francis Kaplan or Jared Diamond¹ – signals a radical shift in the perception of the ultimate limits of human responsibility.

Excursus: what can we learn from the story of ‘animal rights’

Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued more than two centuries ago that animals had the same right to moral care as humans since they shared with the humans the capacity to feel pain and to suffer. Immanuel Kant denied that animals had a *right* to human care – on the ground of their lack of intellectual powers. However, he charged humans with the *duty* of care on the grounds of possessing precisely what the animals lacked: the capacity to reason. Animals are useful to humans, and to be of use they need to be provided for and above all protected from harm. Giving consideration to animals’ needs is therefore humans’ duty to themselves.

After more than two centuries of confinement to the margins of ‘civilized opinion’, Rousseau’s and Kant’s messages sent yet not received in faraway times have now surged out of the black hole of oblivion, to land in the topmost sector of the political agenda. They have blended on the way and congealed into the idea of reciprocity between animals’ rights and humans’ interests. As one would expect of ideas struggling to get hold of rapidly shifting attitudes, the attributes common to humans and animals tend now to be paid more attention and seen as more important than the differences between them. One by one, the boundaries between humans and all other living creatures, laboriously fortified in the past and proclaimed impassable, are being effaced. Kant’s verdict is unlikely to withstand the pressure. Culture and morality are seen no longer as the exclusive property of *Homo sapiens* and the boundary-mark of humanity. This is not so much a matter of scientific discovery of facts as of an ‘attitudinal shift’: the sudden willingness to see what previously went unnoticed and dismiss as of secondary or no importance what previously was cast right in the centre of the world picture. But what has brought such a shift about?

One could venture a guess (a credible supposition, as a matter of fact) that insisting on the uniqueness of *Homo sapiens* lost its function once the need and the urge to differentiate the ‘degrees of humanity’ (and so also of ‘bestiality’) of the superior and inferior (‘civilized’

and ‘retarded’) members of the human race fizzled out, having lost its pragmatic urgency and political usefulness. The less controversial and less hotly contested is the shared membership of humanity, the less sacrosanct and less adamantly guarded is the boundary separating humans from non-humans.

The pressing urge to deny or devalue humanity or some members of the human species was, arguably, the prime motive to seek, find or invent the proof and the symptoms of human uniqueness. One may object to this supposition pointing out that the search was prompted as well, and most vigorously, by the desire to remove all ethical obstacles and moral constraints from the modern intention to gain ‘mastery over nature’ and to force the conquered nature to fit the patterns dictated solely by whatever was deemed to fit the welfare of humankind. This objection, though, may be objected to in turn: the idea of ‘mastery over nature’ was, after all, born alongside the practice of mastery over humans and was from the start bound to lose both urgency and credibility once that practice came to be contested and fell from grace. Practice prompted the idea and supplied the conceptual net in which the idea could be articulated. Mastery over men was projected, conducted and reported in terms of invasion, conquest, colonization and the assimilation/expulsion alternative, and it was these terms that infused sense into the project of mastery over nature. Once these terms have been discredited and the practices to which they referred declared criminal, the bottom fell off the project of mastery over nature. And so, suddenly, the hallowed boundary between (human) culture and (inhuman) nature has lost the importance it was assigned and carried for several centuries. One after another, the border guards have abandoned the border posts and the border controls have begun to be phased out.

On the difficulty of becoming an actor

And so we are all bystanders now: knowing that something needs to be done, but also knowing that we have done less than needs be and not necessarily what needed doing most; and that we are not especially eager to do more or better, and even less keen to abstain from doing what should not be done at all. To make the bystander’s plight, distressing as it always is, more harrowing yet, the gap between things *done* and things *to be done* seems to be swelling instead of shrinking. There are more and more goings-on in the world which we sense to be crying out for vengeance or remedy but our capacity to act, and particularly the aptitude to act effectively, seems to be going into reverse, dwarfed ever more by the enormity of the task. The number of events and situations that we hear of and that cast us in the awkward and reprehensible position of a bystander grows by the day.

Keith Tester puts in the nutshell the quandary that is fast becoming the crucial and most vexing in our globalizing world (Tester 1997: 17): ‘[T]he world is, amongst other things, a producer of horror and atrocity yet seemingly there are no resources which might be the basis of the generation of moral response to many of these instances of suffering.’ In other words, Tester asks why there are so many bystanders in this world of ours. How come that our world has turned into a huge, uncharacteristically efficient branch of modern production – an admirably efficient factory of bystanders?

Between knowing and doing

The first answer that comes to mind the moment Tester’s question is asked is, of course, the distance between the viewer and the suffering on view. It may not have been Clarkson’s

'old man, young woman, child or baby' *near you* that failed to arouse moral response and so made Tester, and us with him, pause and ponder the arcane process of the conveyor-belt like assembly of bystanders. It is instead all those people in pain – poor and miserable men and women of all ages living (or dying) far away from our homes and from the streets we are ever likely to walk. The distance between us and them is enormous – intractable, impassable – by the standards of our ability to walk or travel or the tools we know how to handle and are able to operate. Our experience of their suffering is mediated by television cameras, satellites, cables, screens. A mediated experience enables but a similarly mediated response: digging into our wallets and paying some agency for relieving us temporarily, until the next horrifying images flash on the screen, from pangs of conscience.

Images are aplenty. They appear in our sitting rooms with awesome regularity. They also sink into oblivion a few days or hours later as if to make room for other images, no less if not more shocking and never slow in coming.

Watching terrifying pictures of famine, homelessness, massive death and utter desperation has turned by now, says Tester, into a new 'tradition' of our mediocratic age. Like all things traditional, they've lost power to shock as they have been made 'unproblematic through the practices of mundane and habitual everyday routine' (Tester 1997: 30, 32). This is, as Tester points out, another (expectable) case of Georg Simmel's 'blasé attitude': 'just like the city, television offers so much that our powers of discrimination actually cease to be able to work effectively'. Henning Bech, a most insightful analyst of contemporary urban-living experience, coined the concept of the 'telecity' to make salient the intimate kinship between the detached responses, or non-responsiveness of the *flâneur* (always *in* but never *of* the urban crowd) and the TV-addict's experience. Established charities and the animators of one-off 'carnivals of pity' complain about 'compassion fatigue'. This is, though, exactly the kind of reaction they should have expected from the residents of the telecity. The telecity residents find tiring (boring) anything that lasts beyond a fleeting moment, threatening to outlive the excitement its novelty has triggered. Why should some images of misery be exempt from that rule?

The most obvious answers are not necessarily the best, though. There are at least two other factors that deserve a closer look whenever the riddle (and abomination) is pondered of the notoriously short-lived and flickery, and seldom more than lukewarm, responses to the televised horrors of distant suffering.

One of these factors has been spotted and recorded by Ryszard Kapuściński (1999), a most indefatigable explorer of the paradoxes, antinomies and inanities of our shared global home: the gap between *seeing* and *knowing*. Depending on what is presented to view, the absorption of *images* may thwart rather than prompt and facilitate the assimilation of *knowledge*. It may also bar the *understanding* of what has been noted *and* retained, let alone penetrate its causes.

The suffering 'as seen on TV' is in most cases conveyed through the images of the emaciated bodies of the hungry and the pain-twisted faces of the ill. Hunger calls for the supply of food; disease cries for drugs and medical know-how. Both promptly arrive: lorries loaded with surplus food that, to keep prices high and the stockholders' income rising, clutters the warehouses of affluent countries; and the earnest, devoted and noble volunteers of *Médecins sans frontières* carrying surplus drugs that clutter, for much the same reason, the warehouses of the pharmaceutical multinationals. Nothing is shown, and no word is spoken, of the *causes* of famine and chronic illness. No inkling of the steady destruction of livelihood by the trade *sans frontières*, of the tearing apart of the social safety nets under the pressure of finances *sans frontières*, or of the devastation of soils and communities by monocultures promoted by the merchandisers of genetically engineered seeds in close cooperation with

the missionaries of economic reason from the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. Instead, a persuasive and pervasive suggestion that what has been ‘seen on TV’ was a self-inflicted disaster visiting distant, exotic and ‘very unlike us’ tribes who had blundered themselves out of decent human living. And that – thank God (or our prudence) – some fortunate folks with good hearts like us, fortunate because sensible and industrious, are around, ready to salvage the hapless from the blood-curdling consequences of their bad luck and ill-considered conduct brought about by ignorance or sloth. Come the day of Band Aid or Comic Relief, and the celebrities meant to prompt us to switch on, surrounded by seasoned entertainers meant to keep us switched on and computers meant to keep us proud of having switched on, anchor the spectacle of our benevolence and choke on our behalf with emotion while keeping us abreast of the vertiginous progress of our charity. As if by magic wand, we are transported from the dark and mean hiding places of the wrongdoers’ accomplices to the all-singing, all-dancing holiday camps of the selfless and magnanimous *chevaliers sans reproche*. Our joint responsibility for the human disasters we are invited to help repair is not implied and does not spoil the festival of mutual absolution. Conscience is pricked and placated in one go – in one charitable gesture.

Kapuściński lays bare the gap between seeing and knowing. Yet wider, a truly abysmal gap yawns, however, between *knowing* and *acting*. Were we to become, despite the adverse odds, aware of the real roots of human misery on display, what (if anything) could we do to eradicate them, let alone prevent them from rooting? Luc Boltanski² asks the most pertinent of questions that can and ought to be asked: ‘What form can commitment take when those called to act are thousands of miles away from the persons suffering, comfortably installed in front of the television set in the shelter of the family living-room?’

Tester (1997: 22) recalls Alfred Weber’s anxiety caused by the emergence of a global network of radio broadcasting: ‘the world has become a much smaller place – it is scarcely possible honestly to maintain any kind of pretence of ignorance of what is going on’ – anywhere, in however remote corner of the globe. But things have moved much further still since Weber’s expression of anxiety.

It is not just the *volume* of available (indeed, ubiquitously obtrusive) knowledge that has grown beyond all expectations: the *quality* of the information has radically changed as well. What we know and know of is not just a version of the events we have not seen – a hearsay that we are free to believe or not, a third-person story that we may trust or doubt, accept as true or dispute and with a modicum of effort argue out of conscience. Once images replace the words (photo- or video-graphic images, those frozen and preserved pieces of ‘reality’, its ever more faithful replicas, not just ‘analogue’, but ‘digital’ – read undistorted, copies), the processed, mediated nature of information is concealed from view and no more can it be held against the veracity of the message and authorize a truth contest. Virtually or not, we are now *witnesses* to what is going on in those far away places. We not only *hear about* the pain people suffer, we ‘*see it with our own eyes*’. As Stanley Milgram’s famed experiments have shown, eyes are incomparably more morally sensitive than ears. Even if ‘comfortably installed in the shelter of our living rooms’, we watch, at close quarters, people dying of famine and of other people’s cruelty. Our moral selves are daily accosted and molested, prodded, challenged, pressed to respond.

The snag is, though, that as the circulation of knowledge about our and other people’s plight is becoming ever more effective, the same cannot be said of our capacity for ethically inspired acts. The network of our mutual dependence gets tighter with every advance of globalization – but the gap between the reach of the ‘unanticipated’ (or just ignored or unreckoned with) consequences of our actions and the scope of whatever we can do consciously and deliberately to mitigate such consequences grows wider. The outcomes of our action

and inaction reach far beyond the limits of our moral imagination and our readiness to assume responsibility for the weal and woe of the people whose life has been directly or indirectly affected. This is why, paradoxically, our shared capacity to do harm seems infinitely greater than our shared capacity to do good. As if the tools and technologies of causing (collectively, though unintentionally) misery surge forward, leaving behind the tools and technologies of causing (collectively and deliberately) bliss. The tools of happiness, unlike the vehicles of misery, all seem small-scale, for individual use only, fit solely for servicing private life and individual action. What we can do to alleviate the plight of those affected seems much less potent than what we do, intentionally or by default, to contribute to its misery.

This is *not* to say that globalization promotes callousness and moral indifference. There is no reason to suppose that we have become, or are becoming, less sensitive to human suffering than our ancestors used to be. In anything, the opposite seems to be the case. We are increasingly less tolerant of pain – also of the sight of pain suffered by others, humans or animals (if we are assured, that is, that the pain is ‘for real’). Many varieties of human misery once meekly accepted as unavoidable, ordinary and indeed indispensable accompaniments of human life have been recast as superfluous and gratuitous, unjustified or downright offensive, and above all calling for remedy, for revenge, or – short of these – for (pecuniary) compensation.

The problem, though, is that unlike in the past the volume of our awareness of the fate of others and the scope of our ability to influence that fate (whether to damage or to repair it) *do not overlap*. Our ancestors were direct witnesses to most consequences of their actions because these consequences seldom, if ever, reached further than their unarmed eye (and armed hands) could reach. With the new, global network of dependencies and with technology potent enough to allow for equally global effects of actions, that morally comfortable situation is gone. Knowledge and action no longer overlap, and the realm of their encounter shrinks steadily by comparison with the rapidly expanding area of their discordance. They are out of joint more often than they merge. This new situation may be schematically represented by two circles whose surfaces only marginally coincide (Figure 1).

Only a relatively small portion of the outcomes and repercussions of our actions or inactions are ethically controlled and guided by moral sentiments; few take into consideration their possible effects on other than the direct addressees or participants of the action currently in focus. On the other hand, only relatively few messages about other people’s suffering come to us complete with clear information about what we can do to help, and especially to help radically. Much of the morally pregnant knowledge on offer discourages commitment to action since it is far from evident what (if anything) can be done by us to make a real difference. Many, perhaps most, of our actions do have an impact on the conditions of others, also of distant and unknown others – but only a few of them are from the start accompanied by ethical reflection.

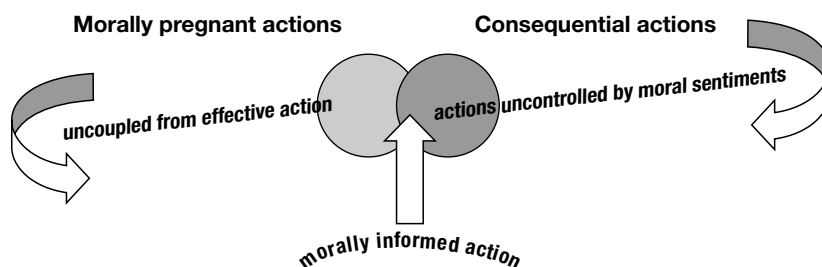


Figure 1

No wonder it is easy to refuse commitment without much moral torment and easy to find arguments legitimizing the denial of guilt. Admonished to seek (as Ulrich Beck memorably phrased it) *biographical* solutions to *systemic* contradictions, to rely solely on our own, individually owned and individually managed resources, and to be told/shown daily that everyone else follows or tries hard to follow that admonition, we grow used to the idea that our individual life-itinerary is the sole realistic concern and the sole ground on which to focus an action one wishes to be effective instead of time-wasteful. It hardly occurs to us that there may be some reason (and hope) in trying to reform the wider conditions under which our biographies (and the biographies of all the rest of our fellow humans) are shaped and biographical solutions are desperately sought. If it were suggested to us to try such reform we would treat the advice with disbelief and we would mistrust the advisers. Refusal of commitment, on the ground of the assumed idleness and ultimately the impotence of collective action, seems to be a rational step to take, a legitimate conclusion from the sober, 'rational' evaluation of the possible and the feasible.

And yet . . . however rational the refusal of commitment appeared to be, its logical elegance would not always lay the pangs of conscience to rest. Conscience is known to stubbornly disregard the reasons of Reason and to have reasons of which Reason knows not. Not always do we switch off the pictures of horror. Time and again we do wish to help the victims, though we seldom go beyond mailing a cheque or phoning our credit card number to a charity agency displayed on the screen. Sometimes we add our indignant voices to the chorus of condemnation of the invidious perpetrators of atrocity (when named) and the chorus of praise for the victims' helpers (if picked up by the reporters from their self-chosen anonymity). Almost never does the commitment go far enough to strike at the roots of wrongdoing. Were we wishing to take up such commitment, we would be hard put to find out where to start and how to proceed from there.

Commitment is *not* inconceivable; neither is the *long-term* commitment, nor the fruitful, *effective*, changing-the-world long-term commitment. But powerful forces conspire to bar our entry. The absence of a proper insight into the tightly sealed cocoon of interdependence, in which the horrors already seen have gestated and those yet unknown and still to be hatched incubate, is one hurdle most difficult to go round or kick out of the way. The chain of causal connections is too ramified, twisted and convoluted to be followed by people untrained and in a hurry; but in addition many of its links tend to sink in secret compartments plastered all over with 'entry forbidden' warnings and impenetrable without security screening and stingily issued passes. The fragments of the chain accessible to view seldom form a cohesive system with clearly marked points of entry and 'install' and 'uninstall' buttons.

Admittedly, the obstacles to effective long-term commitment are numerous and many of them are intractable. It can be argued, though, that the barrier most difficult to negotiate is the one-sidedness of the globalizing process. The progressive interlocking of global dependencies is not paralleled, let alone checked and balanced, by similarly global, and potent, instruments of political action. Diffuse and sporadic 'anti-globalization' protests, however brave and dedicated, are a poor match for the concentrated might of the multinationals, cosseted, shielded and kept out of trouble day in, day out by governments vying for the Michelin stars of hospitality and by the heavily armed forces they command. To remove that hurdle, a better insight would not suffice. But at least it will be (to use Churchill's memorable phrase) 'the end of the beginning'.

Chasing the 'political moment' in a globalized world

By the end of the twentieth century the normative powers of the nation-state, and particularly their practical capacity for sovereign normative regulation, had been thoroughly eroded. Business (and particularly big business, the business that truly counts when it comes to the balancing of state books and securing livelihood of state subjects) has made a successful bid for secession from the realm of state sovereignty. The economic foundations of human survival and well-being are now once more politically 'extraterritorial', just as they used to be two centuries ago at the threshold of the modern era, when business managed to escape from the tight ethical supervision of local community into the 'no-man's land', not yet occupied and administered by the emergent modern state, into a veritable frontier-land where the 'cash nexus' was the sole social bond and cut-throat competition the sole law of the country.

In our times once more an ethically empty space has emerged, inside which the economic powers are free to follow their own rules or, as the case may be, to ignore rules altogether. This new void has been plotted as the result of the emancipation of economic powers from the legislating/policing powers of the selfsame *nation-state* that two centuries ago managed to bridle the economic forces that ran free from *communal* control. This time, however, the secession has not been followed as yet by the emergence of legislative powers capable of imposing ethically pregnant constraints on the newly unbridled economic forces. Economic forces are free to act globally but there are at best only germs and premonitions of a globally binding legal and juridical system, global democracy or globally binding, enforceable and obeyed ethical code.

Ethically motivated and informed global action has no adequately global instruments. In the absence of proper levers and vehicles of effective action, we all seem to be – each one of us individually and all the individuals together – cast in the role of bystanders and bound to carry that role for an unbearably long time to come. Periodic outbursts of protest against eviction from political decision making and compulsory bystanding (the genuine fuse, one may suspect, of the guerrilla-style 'anti-globalization' happenings) seem to be the only, and also sorely inadequate, alternative to the meek acceptance of the state of affairs. They draw attention, arouse awareness of the risks ahead; sometimes they succeed in forcing the hand of the high and mighty on a few points currently in focus. All in all, however, though full of sound and fury, they signify little real change in the balance of power – however noble their intentions, and however great the courage of their actors, may be. On the other hand, the steady, long-term commitment to a collective action meant to cut at the roots of human misery gestated in the new global ethical void has all the appearances of a nebulous dream. It is that nebulousness that wraps the Fukuyama-style announcement of the 'end of history' in the mist of credibility.

But only such a commitment – a steady, long-term commitment – deserves to be called 'the political moment par excellence', as Luc Boltanski suggests (Boltanski 1999: 31, 192, 119, 182) – 'an act that transforms spectator into actor'. Nothing short of such a commitment will do. The other, most frequent responses to the sight of human misery, like hounding particular culprits of particular misdeeds or lauding particular benefactors of particular victims, bring at best temporary and local relief. Most commonly, they alleviate the most painful symptoms of the disease only to detract urgency from its cure. All too often, however, they offer a much needed and gratefully accepted fig leaf to the powers-that-be, eager to channel the gathering tide of moral revulsion away from the genuine sources of ethical outrage, and keen to hide the fact of doing nothing to make the outrage less likely to crop up. At their worst, as Boltanski warns, they may cause *more* misery – as in the case

of 'those in power who exploit past victims to take possession of the future while ignoring present suffering', instead of 'casting eyes on the unfortunate and look evil in its face without immediately turning away towards imaginary benefactors and persecutors'. Quoting Kouchner and Tricaud, the two persons who came to know deeper than most others the trials and tribulations of confronting point blank the evil-doers at their work and bringing succour to their victims, Boltanski demands that whoever volunteers to break out of the vicious circle of the bystander's plight 'should always stay at the bedside of minorities', but 'without illusions, since the minorities may themselves become oppressive'. Not only does the exit from the bystander's cell seem to be bolted but the road outside seems to be full of traps and ambushes.

Commitment able to steer clear of all such dangers, and of a magnitude necessary to make the effort resolute and consistent (particularly if such a commitment is to be undertaken by a great number of people rather than by a few exceptionally broad-minded, warm-hearted and dedicated individuals with strong ethical convictions) is unlikely to take place as long as the confidence in the effectiveness of public speech and its potency to prompt concerted collective action remains as tenuous and fragile as it tends to be today in our thoroughly individualized society. 'To take the claim that speech is *effective* seriously, we need the support of the complicated political construction of the Polis' (Boltanski 1999: 20). And we may add that it is precisely that construction that is currently in trouble – in a state of disrepair and in urgent need of a long overdue overhaul. Trust in the effectiveness of committed speech, and particularly speech oriented to the kind of established political institutions that can be hoped and reasonably expected to subordinate their action to ethical reasons and act for the sake of ethical objectives, is no longer given. It needs to be laboriously built and entrenched jointly with the ethically motivated institutions now either absent or too weak for the task.

Drawing on Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* – the two fundamental statements strikingly different in their style of their argument yet converging in their conclusions and messages – Boltanski suggests that the sought-after Polity may only take the shape of Kant's 'aesthetic community', that is, a community of shared taste built and sustained by the staunch and mutually reconfirming and reinforcing commitment of its members. The road to such a community, again in Boltanski's view, may only lead through committed speech, dialogical in its intention, aimed from its start and throughout the ensuing dialogue at the approval of the others to which it has been addressed: at showing that the topic with which the speech is concerned is *worthy* of approval.

This is, admittedly, not a particularly firm foundation on which to build a strong community confident of its own survival. On the contrary, the 'aesthetic community of compassion' seems to be marked by endemic fragility that needs to be compensated by the continuous, emotionally charged dedication of its builders, wardens and actors.

All this is but a collection of proverbial 'rules of thumb'. These are hints rather than instructions, broad strategic principles rather than marching orders, reflections of the ways and means of construction rather than a building schedule. No more, though, could legitimately be expected from the concerned and responsible analyst of the present-day human condition. To quote Tester once more (Tester 1997: 20), what a responsible sociologist wishing to loyally acquit herself of her responsibility may do is 'to diagnose the present without, however, offering any prognosis' or an 'explicit ethical code or ideal'. What the committed sociologist needs to do is 'to propose that there might be much more to being human than all of this, but then have the honesty to refuse to say what that more might be'. It is the job of the committed speech, aimed to turn into the community-building action

to usher into the territory that the diagnosis has mapped and to guide the steps to be taken, to provide a *practical* answer to the abstract question.

True, there is no guarantee that the answer will be given, heard when spoken and accepted when heard. But there is no other way to find out but to try to offer a suggestion of an answer and to submit the offer to the considered judgement of fellow humans. It is the duty of the sociologist to spell out frankly the 'under-determination' of all conceivable solutions to the shared quandary, to present in full the complexity of positing the task and struggling to fulfil it under conditions of acute uncertainty. And let us note that the vagueness and ambiguity with which the winding road from bystander to moral actor has been sketched is not unlike the incompleteness of another concept (ably discussed by Robert Fine in reference to Hannah Arendt (Fine 2000), 'not so much a fault as a prescription for making judgements and taking decisions with the tools we have in hand'. This may be the lot of all committed speech: it cannot but *give hostages to fate*. Or rather giving hostages not so much to *fate*, as to *dialogue* – hoping that the number will grow of those now silent, disinterested or busy with other concerns but who will eventually take part and add to the dialogue's richness and vigour. There is no other medicine against silence/indifference syndrome except committed speech.

Only a long, uphill struggle ahead can be promised to people who resent and abhor their plight as bystanders, as well as to people who wish the bystanders to acquire the means and to develop the determination needed to lift themselves to the status of moral actors. Both have yet to find the means as well as the courage and the will necessary to apply them. The goal that such means are to serve and hopefully reach can hardly be expressed better than Hannah Arendt has done when looking back at the evils of the 'century of bystanders'. The task, she noted (1994: 132), was to 'assume responsibility for all crimes committed by human beings, in which no one people are assigned a monopoly of guilt and none considers itself superior, in which good citizens would not shrink in horror at German crimes and declare "thank God, I am not like that", but rather recognise in fear and trembling the incalculable evil which humanity is capable of and fight fearlessly, uncompromisingly, everywhere against it'.

Musing over the legacy of the century that had just ground to its close, Göran Rosenberg suggested that meaningful time divisions do not necessarily agree with the round numbers in the calendar. The nineteenth century, he proposed, marked by now bygone youthful exuberance and self-confidence, started in fact in 1789 and ended in 1914. We may suggest that the twentieth century, marked by the sinister discovery that evil can emerge from the civilizing drill not only unscathed but also refreshed and reinforced, started in 1914. It is still very much an open question as to when it is going to end. And it is up to the bystanders struggling to transform themselves into actors to provide the answer to that question – *to be* that answer.

Notes

1. Compare Pierre Vandegiste's survey – 'Le propre de l'homme et la culture chimpanzée', *Le Monde de débats*, June, 22–23.
2. Luc Boltanski, *La souffrance à distance*, here quoted in Graham Burchell's translation, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), XV.

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