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The Thunderbolt of Evil and Goodness without Witnesses: In Conversation with Vasili Grossman, *Life and Fate*

Luc Anckaert

Catholic University of Leuven, Institute of Philosophy
Leveno katalikiškasis universitetas, Filosofijos institutas
Kardinaal Mercierplein 2
B-3000 Leuven
luc.anckaert@kuleuven.be

Summary. The reviled Jewish-Russian war correspondent Vasily Grossman wrote a masterful novel *Life and Fate* about the historical battle of Stalingrad (1943), in which he sharply fillets both the Nazi and Stalinist forms of terror in a literary style. The great ideas about society lead to abuse of power and to oppression. Against the common ideals, Grossman argues for a form of small goodness that takes place on the concrete intersubjective plane. In this article, I elucidate the literary ideas of Grossman by confronting them with analogous philosophical approaches. First of all, the connection between modern rationality and a concentration camp is discussed. Both are accompanied by a form of thoughtlessness. The different forms of small goodness are then analyzed: the refusal to be complicit, the criticism of the great ideologies, the self-sacrifice, the deviation from the command, and the usual ethical norms. For Grossman, the possibility of ethics distinguishes man from the surrounding world. Humanity will remain as long as people are capable of the small goodness.
Keywords: Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, totalitarianism, small goodness, ethics.

Blogio žaibas ir nepaliudytas gerumas: pokalbis su Vasilijumi Grossmanu, *Gyvenimas ir likimas*

Santrauka. Plūstamas žydų ir rusų kilmės karo korespondentas Vasilijus Grossmanas apie istorinį Stalingrado mūšį (1943 m.) parašė meistrišką romaną *Gyvenimas ir likimas*, kuriame literatūriniu stiliumi be gailesčio skrodžiama tiek nacistinė, tiek stalinistinė teroro forma. Didžiosios idėjos apie visuomenės organizavimą privedė prie piktnaudžiavimo valdžia ir priespaudos, todėl bendriems idealams Grossmanas priešpriešina mažus gerumo veiksmus, atliekamus konkrečioje tarpžmogiškoje plotmėje. Straipsnio autorius literatūrines Grossmano idėjas nušviečia sugretindamas jas su analogiškais filosofiniais požiūriais. Pirmiausia aptariama sąsaja tarp modernaus racionalumo ir koncentracijos stovyklos. Juos abu lydi tam tikra nemąstymo forma. Paskui analizuojamos skirtingos mažų gerumo veiksmų formos: atsisakymas prisidėti prie nusikaltimo, didžiųjų ideologijų, pasiaukojimo kritika, nukrypimas nuo komandos ir įprastų etinių normų. Grossmano manymu, etikos galimybė išskiria žmogų iš jį supančio pasaulio. Žmogiškumas išliks tol, kol žmonės bus pajėgūs atlikti mažus gerumo veiksmus.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Vasilijus Grossmanas, *Gyvenimas ir likimas*, totalitarizmas, maži gerumo veiksmai, etika.

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The plan of the *Jüdisches Museum* in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind (Schneider 2005), is a thunderbolt: the metaphor for the impact of evil in historical time. The continuity of history has been broken. The museum is the architectural expression of a tight order that bursts at the joints. Each constructed wall is an inclined angle, the floors deviate from the horizontal plane, the inky black and claustrophobic chimney evokes the fears of death of the gas chambers, and the strictly symmetrical "Garden of Banishment" disrupts any straight line. The *Shoah* or catastrophe is the fate that breaks life.

After his very successful career as a Soviet writer and war correspondent, an iron fate struck Vasili Grossman in 1960, who had to experience that almost all copies of his masterly manuscript *Life and Fate* (Grossman 2006) were confiscated by censorship (Garrard & Garrard 2012). After Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin, Grossman had hopefully offered the manuscript for publication. But even the carbon sheets were claimed and destroyed. However, the frivolity of fate allowed a lost copy of the "arrested manuscript" to appear in Switzerland. In 1980, the novel appeared in Russian as well as in French (Grossman 2016; Grossman 1980).[1] Emmanuel Levinas was one the first readers of Grossman (Levinas 2001: 80) and inspired thus many to read Grossman himself.

The Jewish-Russian writer has in any case written a desolate black book. In *Life and Fate* we read a desolate account of inhumanity and evil, but also of human freedom expressed in forms of little goodness. In the disillusioned reality, man continues to hear the intimate call for freedom. The novel is at the same level as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Tolstoy 1942) on the Napoleonic Wars: 864 pages in the English translation, an incredible multitude of characters, and a complex network of storylines. The battle of Stalingrad – a turning point in the conquest of Nazism – forms the historical guideline for sketching a radical picture of people who are struck by fate. The novel is also a reflection on the history and ideologies in which people have been thrown. Many brilliant pages remain burnt in memory. The cynical desolation of fate is infinitely reflected in the steel-hard descriptions of the extermination machinery, the oppressive sky of the Kalmyk steppe, the folded metal and the pulverized concrete of the fragmented factories at the Volga. Grossman's overwhelming novel obliges us to reflect on war, violence, and totalitarianism, but also on freedom, hope, and goodness.

1. The Camps as a Metaphor for Totalitarianism

The reality of the camp as a social experiment is the gruesome truth of totalitarian ideologies. Grossman opens his novel with the description of the camps as "the cities of a new Europe" (*LF*, 6) and of the inmates as "guinea-pigs in a laboratory" (*LF*, 8). The camp is not strange to the totalitarian reality – it forms the ultimate realization of it.

[1] We refer to *Life and Fate* as LF.

1.1. Modern Rationality and the Camps

The camps are taking on the technological advances of the modern world: "The twentieth century finally intruded upon the sacred simplicity of penal servitude (*LF*, 828)." This culminates in mechanical eradication in the gas chambers. The interior of the concrete rooms was a perfect example of the industrial era of great masses and speeds:

> Number one complex was constructed according to the principle of the turbine. It was capable of transforming life itself, and all forms of energy pertaining to it, into inorganic matter. This new turbine had to overcome and harness the power of psychic, nervous, respiratory, cardiac, muscular and circulatory energy. And in this building the principle of the turbine was combined with those of the slaughterhouse and the garage incineration unit. His task had been to find a way of integrating these various factors in one architectural solution... Once life had entered the supply canals, it was impossible for it to stop or turn back; its speed of flow down the concrete corridor was determined by formulae analogous to that of Stokes regarding the movement of liquid down a tube (a function of its density, specific gravity, viscosity and temperature, and of the friction involved (*LF*, 458)).

The camp and the world reflect each other. The camp is the triumph of a certain form of rationality. This relationship was elaborated by sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 1989). Within his functionalist approach to the Holocaust, the basic structure of modern culture is expressed by the metaphor of the gardens of Versailles. The geometrically designed garden is a work of art in which rational planning aims to achieve a perfect result. Everything is reduced to an instrumental value. Each element of the project is either useful or annoying. People and things have no autonomous value but are only valuable in function of an external purpose. What does not take place within this rationality is considered to be weeds or vermin. According to Bauman, genocide is the expression of this rational planning.

The boundaries can fade, so that the outside world becomes a proliferation of the camp. In the end, totalitarianism wants to install the camp structure all over the world. We must therefore understand the reality of the camp not primarily as the result of negative oppression, but as a positive policy of power. In the camps, an experimental way is created to domesticate people and their bodies within strictly defined spatio-temporal structures, creating new power. In other words, the camp is an experiment of biopolitics in which new forms of the exercise of power are produced. Totalitarianism wants to transform the whole of society into a productive biopolitical body of power (Foucault 1976: 175–211).

1.2. Scientific Rationality and the Camps

Grossman combines the reality of the camp not only with the social and technological reality but also with the scientific changes. Viktor Strum, the physicist affiliated with most characters, is fascinated by the similarity between scientific and social developments. Mathematics does not reflect "the world; the world itself was a projection of differential

equations, a reflection of mathematics" (*LF*, 332). Strum recognizes that new developments in theory mean a shift of paradigm. The Euclidean world, with its geometric structure formed by masses and speeds, was freed by Einstein from the shackles of absolute time and space. Quantum theory had replaced the fixed laws to which physical individuals are subject by the new laws of probability. A different type of statistic emerges that rejects individuality and only recognizes larger entities (*LF*, 62). Each individuality is related to flexible totalities. The certainties and mediating structures lapse, as a result of which the individual is thrown back on himself and only relates to the uncertain whole. Are totalitarian regimes and atomic structures determined by the same unstable laws of probability? In any case, the individual is denied.

Hannah Arendt, in her study on totalitarianism, pointed out that this discarding of the individual on its own without social links is the prerequisite for the totalitarian exercise of power. She indicates that massification is a condition for totalitarianism. Social links are dissociated so that each individual is placed before the whole, without the mediation of a civil society: "Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals" (Arendt 1976: 323). The result is that everyone is atomized, and that the fellow human being can no longer express trust. Spontaneous solidarity has been replaced by mistrust. Historian Orlando Figes confirms this in his research into daily life under Stalin (Figes 2007).

1.3. Thinking and Thoughtlessness

Grossman writes that society as a whole will become a camp in which "the principle of personal freedom [is] subordinated, clearly and absolutely, to the higher principle of reason" (*LF*, 829). Totalitarianism is the triumph of a rationality that stifles individual freedom. Individual freedom is, however, the seat of the ethics of responsibility.

In the aforementioned rationality, moral responsibility is replaced by technical responsibility. The proper execution of the imposed task takes priority over a sense of responsibility toward moral significance. The bureaucracy involved is closely related to this structure of action. Within this rationally constructed world there is no longer any place for thinking.

Arendt has worked this out as thoughtlessness (Arendt 1982). The summit of technical rationality goes hand in hand with a peculiar blindness. It is striking that, unlike in her book on totalitarianism, Arendt no longer understands radical evil from Kant's ethical texts (e.g., the radical evil in *Die Religion* (Kant 1998a)), but from his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Kant 1998b). Ethical thoughtlessness has nothing to do with the ability to test actions against the categorical imperative, but rather with the taste judgment that is intersubjective. Arendt elaborates this in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Arendt 1982), which can be considered as the design of the third part of her unfinished study *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt 1978). The power of judgment, analogous to the taste judgment, is impartial and disinterested. In the eye of the spirit, one sees the whole that gives mean-

ing to the particular. One takes the position of the spectator. The spectator looks at the whole, while the actor only sees the part that is related to him. In this sense, Kant can, a posteriori, express enthusiasm (*Geschichtszeichen*) for the French Revolution, which, although privately an abomination, represented untold progress in European history (Kant 1998c, A84). The power of judgment must meet three criteria: a comparison with the possible judgments of the others, the displacement of the other's thought (extended way of thinking), and its conformity with itself (the consistency rule) (Kant 1998b, A160–163). This is not a cognitive matter but a judgment issue in a worldly context (*ta anthropina*). It is precisely this power of judgment that the bureaucrat, such as Eichmann (Arendt 1994), lacks: not so much the consistent observance of rules but the possibility to judge as a spectator what is happening in a universal humanity perspective. This critical perspective is missing in the blind rationality of totalitarian systems.

2. Traces of Little Goodness

The camp, as a paradigm of totalitarian reality, shows itself as a biopolitical structure characterized by a certain type of rationality and scientificity. Individuality is incorporated into a productive constellation of power and becomes an isolated atom. The possibility of an Archimedean outside disappears, although this is the place (as translation of the Greek *ethos*) where thinking can ask the question of what is actually going on. Yet, according to Grossman, we find traces of freedom and human dignity. Not so much as forms of *parêsia or* open-minded speech against the compulsorily imposed opinion (Foucault 2016), but as frank and free action on the basis of a shared humanity. They are the hidden niches of responsibility within the functioning system of power. It is the ineradicable reality of the little goodness that questions every socio-political system from within. The little goodness manifests itself in different ways. The novel shows a hidden network of connection between people who let the little goodness light up through darkness as an appeal of life force against ruthless fate.

3. The Little Goodness as Critique on Ideologies

The little goodness appears first of all as a critique of every theory and ideology of the good. In chapter 67 of the first part, a conversation takes place in the camp between a few Mensheviks and Michael Mostovskoy, a Bolshevik. The elderly Mostovskoy shall be confronted with the proposition that "it's precisely Stalin's monstrous inhumanity that makes him Lenin's successor" (*LF*, 285). The legitimacy of the terrorist violence to realize the Marxist-Leninist ideal is at stake. During this ideological discussion, Ikonikov-Morzh – "that holy fool, that seeker after God" (*LF*, 304), like there are many walking in the work of Tolstoy – comes forward. Ikonnikov has radically inscribed the little goodness in his life. He hands Mostovskoy "some dirty sheets of paper covered in writing" (*LF*, 287) and asks him to read them.

3.1. The Discreet Refusal of Complicity

Ikonnikov foresees his own death. He knows that the building pits he helped dig are for gas chambers and that in this way he is complicit in preparing for the horror. He resolutely refuses to cooperate with his own death, even though this refusal may cost him his life. In the subsequent conversation with the priest Gardi, which is reminiscent of an inversion of the Great Inquisitor's passage in *The Brothers Karamazov* of Dostoyevsky (Dostoyevsky 1987), he contradicts the proposition that everyone participates and that God will forgive.

> But me – I'm not asking for absolution of sins. I don't want to be told that it's the people with power over us who are guilty, that we're innocent slaves, that we're not guilty because we're not free. I *am* free. I'm building a *Vernichtungslager*; I have to answer to the people who'll be gassed here. I can say "No". There's nothing can stop me – as long as I can find the strength to face the destruction. I *will* say "No!" *Je dirai non, mio padre, je dirai non*!
>
> Gardi placed his hands on Ikonnikovs grey head. "*Donnez-moi votre main*," he said. "Now the shepherd's going to admonish the lost sheep for his pride," said Chernetsov. Mostovskoy nodded.
>
> But rather than admonishing Ikonnikov, Gardi lifted his dirty hand to his lips and kissed it (*LF*, 288–289).

Ikonnikov refuses to abdicate his responsibility under the guise of a deadly command structure and stands up for his own freedom. This freedom is the source of the little goodness that manifests itself here as a small protest against the inevitable injustice. It brought the Grand Inquisitor to silence, who kissed Ikonnikov like the starets Zosima in Dostoyevsky. A few chapters later, the bed of Ikonnikov, who turns out to have been executed, is empty (*LF*, 304).

> The holy fool? The man you used to call the blancmange? He was executed. He refused to work on the construction of an extermination camp. Keyze was ordered to shoot him (*LF*, 515).

3.2. The Violence of the Great Ideas

Ikonnikov's text fragments are the subject of a discussion between the imprisoned Bolshevik Mostovskoy and the responsible SS-officer Liss. In a grand literary gesture, Grossman confronts the little goodness with the two great totalitarian visions of the good, namely communism and Nazism. Do the fascist empire and the socialist state not bear a deep resemblance? And are both parties not convinced of their own right? Does one not always act starting from a vision of the great good? "Even Herod did not shed blood in the name of evil; he shed blood in the name of his particular good" (*LF*, 389). The disenchanting insight that the idea of the good "sinks into the mire of life" (*LF*, 390) melts away in Grossman's mind all appreciation for "sermons of religious teachers and prophets, nor in the teachings of sociologists and popular leaders, nor in the ethical systems of philosophers" (*LF*, 391).

The problem of the good that leads to totalitarianism can once again be approached from Arendt. Hannah Arendt distinguishes three important aspects of the human existence (Arendt 1958). They are connected with the human condition, the conditions that life imposes on mankind. Man is a product of nature, he is situated in a spatio-temporal environment in which he can build a world and he lives with others. In response to this, active life is threefold. By laboring, man sustains his metabolism; by working, he produces culture, and by acting, he realizes a political society.

Work has a specific structure. The craftsman and artists were appreciated as the ones who make sustainable and unique products in ancient Athens. It is a form of technique in which one has an ideal in mind that one wants to realize in materiality. In order to do this, certain means are needed. The means are extrinsic to the intended goal. It is said that the neo-Platonic Michelangelo understood his art production in the same way. The artist has the ideal image in mind, sees it in the marble and cuts away all superfluous pieces. The realization of an artifact has to do with the imitation of an idea. The artist has in mind a type. The concrete object is a picture of a pre-existing example, a model, an idea. One could call this an onto-typological structure: a certain ideal or *tupos* is impressed on concrete things.

The structure of acting is different. As interaction between people, action does not aim to achieve a goal that lies outside the interaction, but the goal coincides with the interaction. Political action is the most important example of this for the Greeks. Politics happen between the free citizens and consist of the discussion between different interests. In politics, one not only achieves a goal in which all means are good as effectively, but in politics, especially in democracy, one tries to realize the common good or the *bonum commune* through dialogue. As such, the politics are the opposite of the technician's onto-typology.

Plato, however, saw politics as the realization of a pre-existing idea. In this way, he applies the fundamental structure of the work to another field of action of mankind, namely action.

> It was Plato who was the first in *The Republic* to interpret politics as a form of *poièsis* (= acting like a craftsman). He connects politics to a given idea, a paradigm, the imitation or *mimèsis* of which guarantees the development of a good state. The philosophers are inevitably the best rulers, because they are best suited to gain a true insight into the idea. Plato fights democracy because it is exposed to discussion, to the irrepressible plurality of opinions and to doxai (De Schutter 1995: 186).

When the ideas of the philosophers in Plato's line determine in advance what politics should look like, a radical distortion of politics arises. Politics then consist of the technical realization of a certain ideal. This happened in Communist Russia, where the idea of a non-alienated society as a goal determined the means.

> I have seen the unshakeable strength of the idea of social good that was born in my own country. I saw this struggle during the period of general collectivization and again in 1937. I saw people being annihilated in the name of an idea of good as fine and humane as the

> ideal of Christianity. I saw whole villages dying of hunger; I saw peasant children dying in the snows of Siberia; I saw trains bound for Siberia with hundreds and thousands of men and women from Moscow, Leningrad and every city in Russia – men and women who had been declared enemies of a great and bright idea of social good. This idea was something fine and noble – yet it killed some without mercy, crippled the lives of others, and separated wives from husbands and children from fathers (*LF*, 390–391).

When acting is understood theoretically, the paradox arises that the imposed ideal has a killing effect. Film lovers can think of the impressive scene from *Doktor Zhivago* (1965) in which a thunderous train, decorated with a red flag and pennant, steams straight toward the goal. The dominance of the supposed ideal destroys everything that is on the road without affecting the concrete humanity.

In contrast to the impact of evil, which exploits history from within and destroys human secrets, there is the silent power of the little goodness.[2] This little goodness is placed opposite both systems, represented in Liss and Mostovskoy. Grossman makes a clear distinction between the good and the goodness. He only believes in the goodness that is directed at a specific person. The little goodness is the responsibility for the other, separate from any system and concept of the good. It is most strongly expressed by Ikonnikov. The dirty sheets of paper he gave to Mostovskoy, who had been crushed by his own government, are a treatise on the little goodness. He left them as "a legacy without testament" (Char 1946). Against the destructive power of historical ideologies, which is the ideal of the great good, Ikonnikov describes the little goodness as an "unwitnessed kindness" (*LF*, 392):

> Yes, as well as this terrible Good with a capital G, there is everyday human kindness. The kindness of an old woman carrying a piece of bread to a prisoner, the kindness of a soldier allowing a wounded enemy to drink from his water-flask, the kindness of youth towards age, the kindness of a peasant hiding an old Jew in his loft. The kindness of a prison guard who risks his own liberty to pass on letters written by a prisoner not to his ideological comrades, but to his wife and mother (*LF*, 391–392).

Goodness is ineradicable: "The powerlessness of kindness, of senseless kindness, is the secret of its immortality. This dumb, blind love is man's meaning" (*LF*, 394). That little goodness is the deepest secret of Man.

4. The Unwitnessed Goodness and the Secret of the Human Soul

The little goodness reveals itself in the deepest darkness: "But the more I saw the darkness of Fascism, the more clearly I realized that human qualities persist even on the edge of the grave, even at the door of the gas chamber" (*LF*, 394). Sofya Levinton Osipovna,

[2] Grossman speaks of *dobro* (the idea of social good) and *dobrota* (the little goodness). The translator Robert Chandler translates *dobrota* as kindness. In the French translation, we read *bonté* (Grosmann 1980: 383). In my own text, I prefer this to be expressed in the terms of "little goodness," but in the quotes, I respect the translation of Chandler.

a childless doctor, is standing on the threshold of the gas chamber, on the edge of the abyss. Goodness happens between people and is not recorded in the annals of history. It originates from the secret of the soul and is found in the cryptic caving of the *anus mundi* (Kielar 1979):

> It was the secret of your soul. However passionately it might long to, your soul could never betray this secret. You carry away this sense of your life without having ever shared it with anyone: the miracle of a particular individual whose conscious and unconscious contain everything good and bad, everything funny, sweet, shameful, pitiful, timid, tender, uncertain, that has happened from childhood to old age – fused into the mysterious sense of an individual life (*LF*, 527).

Sofya Levinton recognizes this divine secret in another woman, Deborah:

> The machinist's wife was walking along beside her; in her arms the pathetic little baby, its head too large for its body, was looking around with a calm, thoughtful expression. It was this woman, Deborah, who one night in the good-wagons has stolen a handful of sugar for her baby. The injured party had been too feeble to do anything, but old Lapidus had stood up for her. Now this Deborah was walking along beside her, holding her baby in her arms. And the baby, who had cried day and night, was quite silent. The woman's sad dark eyes stopped one from noticing the hideousness of her dirty face and pale crumpled lips. "A Madonna!" thought Sofya Levinton (*LF*, 529).

A Talmud comment by Emmanuel Levinas on creation (Levinas 1990) allows us to explore this invisible secret of the soul.[3] The Hebrew word that indicates creation, *vayyitzer*, contains an orthographic error (Gn. 2:7). The word is written with a double *iod*. Why? Levinas stumbles over this detail and searches passionately for a meaning. At a certain moment, he reads the double *iod* as two faces. Spontaneously one would think of the paradisiacal story in Genesis. The double *iod* can then indicate the faces that are turned toward each other in the erotic attraction of man and woman. With Talmudic capriciousness and diligence, however, Levinas connects the problem with Ps. 139.5: "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." Man has two faces so he can be seen from the front as well as from the back. With only one face, man has an occiput that remains hidden and in which he can cherish dark thoughts. With two faces, however, everything is visible. The gaze of the infinite penetrates man in all directions, in life and death. There is no longer any shelter or hiding place. The double face expresses the fact that man cannot escape the gaze of infinity. This gaze, however, is not a judgment, but a unique selection and a palm of protection. However, this singular transparency remains invisible in the eyes of other people.

Levinas calls this the mystery of the human soul. This secret has to do with the ethical dwelling-place, the home of mankind. The visibility of man in the eyes of the invisible God and the invisibility of man in the eyes of others are the mysteries of responsibility.

[3] The complex relation between Grossman and Levinas (Levinas 2001) is fully elaborated in Anckaert 2019.

Two "faces" mean the end of personal self-interest. Everywhere and anytime, there is the appearance of the infinite that precedes the own vision. My existence is embedded in an "infinity."

This secret means a new and personal responsibility. This is the second meaning of the double face. The infinity, which sees through the finite, refers to the other person whose face calls for a new responsibility. Under the gaze without sleep of God one is the bearer of another subject. Being carried by the gaze and the palm – or with an old-fashioned term "mercy" – means the task of carrying and cherishing the other. The woman is carrying the child to life in her body. It is not by chance that the Hebrew word for mercy is related to the womb. To be mysteriously seen by God means a responsibility for the other. Becoming visible is an ethical election. The naked existence in the eyes of God – in which the entire skin becomes visible and there can no longer be any concealment – is the place where the responsibility for the other person inscribes itself. This mercy – which carries the other person to life – is extremely expressed in the gas chamber where the childless Sofya becomes the spiritual mother of the already stitched orphan David.

> Sofya Levinton felt the boy's body subside in her arms. Once again, she had fallen behind him. In mine-shafts where the air becomes poisoned, it is always the little creatures, the birds and mice, that die first. This boy, with his slight, bird-like body, had left before her. "I've become a mother," she thought. That was her last thought (*LF*, 538).

5. The Goodness as Declination from the Straight Line

Goodness is rooted in the invisible mystery of mankind. But it would remain powerless if it had not found expression in the sometimes-inhuman reality. The mystery of goodness becomes a false mystique when reality remains unmoved by it. Grossman connects goodness without witnesses not only to the Tolstoian fools and merciful mothers, but also to those in power who do not simply accept the logic of violence. A third finding place of goodness lies between the straightforwardness of order and the deviating right to humanity. The tank colonel Novikov stalls the orders of Stalin himself for a decisive attack around Stalingrad for a few minutes to save the lives of many of his soldiers.

5.1. Order and Self-Sacrifice

Within military logic, it is evident that orders are fully complied with, certainly at decisive moments in a war situation. Insubordination is destructive for this logic. Conversely, following orders means a certain death. The orders are destructive for life.

This paradox implies a necessary willingness to make sacrifices. Before the crucial tank attack, which marked a turning point in the Second World War, the commander general Getmanov is mentioned: "The necessity of sacrificing men to the cause had always seemed natural and incontestable – in peace as well as in war" (*LF*, 627). Military logic leads to the problem of sacrifice. According to philosopher Moshe Halbertal, fulfilling

military duty requires a form of self-transcendence and self-sacrifice (Halbertal 2012). For the sake of the good cause, the soldier sacrifices his urge to life or self-preservation. For reasons of self-preservation alone, it would be incredibly foolish to start a war or to participate in it. Self-preservation must be transcended. But unlike in a Kantian perspective, self-transcendence does not mean following a universal ethical imperative but rather defending a cause or an idea of the good.

The moral conflict is situated in the uncertain region between self-interest and a categorical imperative. This in-between area is where the greatest moral derailments occur. A misunderstanding of self-transcendence leads to acts that are perceived as heroic, moral, or respectable, but which are criminal outside the ideology used. This is the result of two reversals with which Halbertal substantiates the relation between self-sacrifice and violence. When the supposed good is recognized by the willingness to risk one's life for it and to sacrifice oneself, it is also true that the self-sacrifice becomes something good. In addition, the fact that one sacrifices one's life for a cause means, conversely, that one has the right to take another's life for that cause. This is the truth of the suicide attack.

The chain of command implies a self-transcendence in which the subordinate sacrifices his own interests for a cause or an idea. The supposed good cause requires the sacrifice and implies the possibility of sacrificing the lives of others. Enthusiasm transcends one's own interests. Halbertal refers to Himmler's famous speech in which these reversals in their perverse character come to the fore (Halbertal 2012: 70–71). The Nazis had to sacrifice their own sense of justice in order to do the dirty and irresponsible things that were necessary for the so-called good cause, the realization of which requires the death of the other.

5.2. How Can One Deviate from Ethics?

The next question is how to reconcile conscience with this perverted self-transcendence. How can one deviate from the categorical imperative? Arendt's interpretation of the Eichmann case is enlightening here. The publication of the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* in 1963 meant a radical change in the attitudes toward the Holocaust (Arendt 1994). Her mainly historical book – the text is the reissue of a series of articles in *The New Yorker* – can be synthesized into three propositions that led to the controversy. Arendt criticized the pedagogical character of the process by which one wants to locate evil in a person. She reproached the Jewish councils for participating in the deportations. But above all, she wanted to understand the crimes from the point of view of man, not man from the point of view of crimes. Here she comes to the proposition of the banality of the perpetrator of evil. Eichmann – the bureaucratic manager of the extermination camps – is described as the banal man who is no longer able to think about what is happening. The problem with Eichmann was precisely that there were as many as he was, and that

> the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of

> judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied – as had been said at Nuremberg over and over again by the defendants and their counsels – that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis humani generis*, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong (Arendt 1994: 276).

Eichmann never thought about what he was actually doing. He was not stupid. It was, in a sense, pure thoughtlessness (cf. supra). Eichmann emphasized that he had done his duty for his own consciousness as a law-abiding citizen. He stated not only that he had obeyed orders, but also that he had obeyed the law. This is made clear by acting in accordance with the Kantian view of duty, i.e., the first formulation of the categorical imperative. Eichmann said: "I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws" (Arendt 1994: 136). Since his participation in the *Endlösung*, he would not have followed this principle anymore, because he was no longer the master of himself. That is why he had inflected the Kantian imperative into: "Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your actions, would approve it" (Arendt 1994: 136). Eichmann called this "the categorical imperative for house-hold use of the little man" (Arendt 1994: 136). The inflection of the imperative raises the question of thoughtlessness as the inability to judge. This inflection leads to a dangerous area between self-interest and categorical imperative. In self-blinding, one sacrifices oneself as a selfish or ethically motivated person in order to become radically dependent on the order for self-transcendence.

5.3. How Can One Deviate from Orders?

However, the reverse question is equally urgent: how can one deviate from the outright order? At the start of the battle for Stalingrad, the tank commander, Colonel Novikov, receives the order to launch the decisive attack. Before ordering the attack, he thinks back to a meeting with young recruits he had seen on a village square. He also realizes that "mothers contest a man's right to send another man to his death" (*LF*, 625). Novikov rejects Stalin's direct order to launch the attack because enemy artillery batteries are still active and would mean the death of many innocent boys. He is waiting a few elongated minutes to save human lives with this postponement. The power of the state, which coincides with Stalin's will, is crippled by a small disobedience. His motivation is reminiscent of Antigone's tragic courage:

> There is one right even more important than the right to send men to their death without thinking: the right to think twice before you send men to their death. Novikov carried out this responsibility to the full (*LF*, 628).

The courageous hesitation spares innocent lives.

> "And what I'll never forget, Pyotr Pavlovich," Getmanov went on, his voice lowered to a whisper, "is the way you hung fire for eight minutes at the beginning. The army commander

> was waiting. Yeremenko was waiting. I've heard that Stalin himself phoned to ask why the tanks hadn't come in yet. You made Stalin wait. And then you breached the enemy front without losing one tank, without losing one man. That's something I'll never forget" (*LF*, 638).

The fold or the declination from Novikov's free will, fed by the confrontation with the recruits and the maternal care, saves humanity.

The young Karl Marx pointed out this possibility in his doctoral dissertation on the difference in the atomic theory of Democritus and Epicurus (Marx 1962). Higher up, we wrote that there is a curious parallel between scientific and social logic. Marx argues in the context of outdated physics the importance of the declination in Epicurus. Democritus (460–370) stated that being consists of an infinite number of atoms that are only quantitatively determined by solidity, mass, and extension (Demokrit 1989). The atoms move in a straight line in space. Accidental collisions cause them to hang together or repel each other. In this way, conglomerates are created that are visible to our senses. Epicurus (341–270) changed the doctrine of Democritus: the atoms fall perpendicularly (Epicurus 1926). In order to explain the existence of bodies through association, he introduces a new movement opposite Democritus, namely the declination. In doing so, he breaks through the iron laws of the determinism of Democritus. The famous theory of the *clinamen* refers to the small declination. Marx calls this declination "die wirkliche Seele des Atoms" (Marx 1962: 42). In dialectical terms, Marx states that the declination is the negation of the quantitative straight line through which the atom can determine itself qualitatively. The negation of the movement of the straight line is another movement, a declination. This causes the atom to be thrown back on itself, outside the fall movement, and it can determine itself. Due to the declination, new connections are also possible. The *clinamen* opposes the vertical fall. Otherwise, a new perpendicular line will be created. The deviating atom shows similarities with the epicurean gods who live in the free interworlds and who are not involved in worldly affairs. According to Epicurus, the declination is invisible and extends throughout the system. It forms the possibility for the *ataraxia* (imperturbability, peace of mind) as the supreme good. Lucretius, too, who follows Epicure's theses, grants freedom to the smallest material particles. He links the declination to the possibility of freedom:

> So seest thou not, how, though external force
> Drive men before, and often make them move,
> Onward against desire, and headlong snatched,
> Yet is there something in these breasts of ours
> Strong to combat, strong to withstand the same?
>
> (Lucretius 1943, II, 277–280)

Marx emphasizes the importance of the declination not only to explain the formation of new conglomerates, but probably as a place of discovery for human freedom in a deterministic world. The last sentence of the paragraph about declination as the soul of the atom has been added in the original manuscript. He emphasizes the sociopolitical

significance of the declination. "In the political domain there is the covenant, in the social sphere there is the friendship, which is praised as the supreme good" (Marx 1962: 45). Marx has probably paid attention to the physical problems of the constitution of nature in order to search for a niche of human freedom.

The colonel lives in this niche of freedom and has realized this declination, and he realizes this potential by slightly bending a direct order from Stalin. Unwitnessed goodness can lead to a small bending of the systematic violence of war. This bending opens a chance of humanity.

6. The Power of the Little Goodness and the Radix of Humanity

According to Grossman, three factors play a role in the success of totalitarian ideologies (*LF*, 198–199). First of all, there is the obedience of human nature. Totalitarian social systems paralyze the human mind. The crimes are being transformed into higher-level humane acts. In this way, conscience can be reconciled with the natural urge for self-preservation. Then, there is the hypnotizing power of global ideologies. This calls for necessary sacrifices using all available means in order to achieve the highest goal. The goal is expressed in great ideas, like the grandeur of the fatherland, global progress, the happiness of a particular social class, a nation, or even the whole mankind. Finally, there is the fear of limitless terror. Violence is no longer a means to an end, but the object of mystical worship. Within this fear and desperation, there remains the hope of escaping the dance. In describing these three factors, Grossman presupposes an original fact of goodness that is perverted. He concludes his analysis as follows:

> Does human nature undergo a true change in the cauldron of totalitarian violence? Does man lose his innate yearning for freedom? The fate of both man and the totalitarian State depends on the answer to this question. If human nature does change, then the eternal and world-wide triumph of the dictatorial State is assured; if his yearning for freedom remains constant, then the totalitarian State is doomed (*LF*, 200).

Throughout the novel, Grossman struggles with the question of the power of the innate yearning for freedom. At the end of the novel, he looks at the tension between life and fate through the eyes of an old woman, a primeval mother who incarnates the life of Russia:

> Even though they all knew only too well that at times like these no man can forge his own happiness and that fate alone has the power to pardon and chastise, to raise up to glory and to plunge into need, to reduce a man to labour-camp dust, nevertheless neither fate, nor history, nor the anger of the State, nor the glory or infamy of battle has any power to affect those who call themselves human beings. No, whatever life holds in store – they will live as human beings and die as human beings, the same as those who have already perished; and in this alone lies man's eternal and bitter victory over all the grandiose and inhuman forces that ever have been or will be (*LF*, 846).

Both quotations form a content-related inclusion in which human life and the pursuit of freedom are juxtaposed against fate. Disillusioned with the great ideas about the good,

Grossman sees the quest for freedom become concrete in the little goodness that forms the invisible mystery of the human soul. The existence of goodness as the concrete possibility of ethical action enables mankind to resist any nihilistic destruction of life. Man is autonomous because of his moral capacities. The possibility of ethics distinguishes him from the surrounding world. Humanity will remain as long as people are capable of this goodness: Ikonnikov's refusal to help build the gas chambers, the bread that is given to the refugee, the mercy of the mother who carries the dead child, the unwavering courage of Novikov to ignore an order.

Conclusion

Like Kant, Grossman opts for a belief in the original goodness of man. Evil is a perversion or reversal of the motives for action by which inhumanity crushes or even destroys the original freedom (Kant 1989a). Like Levinas, Grossman states that an ethical attitude of responsibility precedes the prevailing systems (Levinas 1990; Rolland 1989). From this perspective, it is possible to criticize any alleged value that invites to a false self-transcendence. This idea was taken up by Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 1989). Ethics has a presocial origin and cannot be founded in the interactions in which people function. On the contrary, society can experience the ethical imperatives as very disruptive because they are anticonformist. The relationship of responsibility is primarily confirmed regarding social relations. The dominant morals of totalitarianism can never definitively affect a society at its roots, because an ethical goodness precedes any form of society.

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