

# HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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## **Abstract:**

The manifestation of evil poses one of the greatest challenges to the notion of human dignity. This article starts from the premise that it is profitable to conceive of human dignity in a negative way, by identifying aspects of human societal behaviour that constitute attacks on, and abuses of, human rights and liberties. It then offers a discussion of evil and its manifestations as challenge to human dignity, exemplified by the Holocaust, the Stalinist trials and by Adolf Eichmann. The article concludes with an account of Ellie Wiesel's theological response to the problem of evil, identifying in it a way towards partial restoration of dignity for victims of abuse.

**Keywords:** *Human dignity, problem of evil, the Holocaust, Stalinist trials, Adolf Eichmann, Ellie Wiesel.*

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## **Introduction**

Human dignity is a concept that has been placed at the centre of modern-day formulations of human rights and liberties. As used in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other such documents,<sup>1</sup> human dignity is seen as that quality humans have that makes them unique, thus distinguishing them from other creatures, particularly from animals. Most notably, the concept singularizes free will, the capacity for moral choices and reasoning as characteristics unique to human beings and evidence of inherent dignity.

Of course, this is a generic definition of human dignity, expressing a classical Western understanding of human nature, which may need adjustment in order to become applicable to other cultures. Furthermore, con-

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1 On various European formulations of such rights and their relation to the concept of human dignity, see Paolo Becchi / Klaus Mathis (eds.), *Handbook of Human Dignity in Europe*, Cham, Springer, 2019.

sidering the new social and environmental challenges our world faces, as well as the technological advancements that give birth to new realities thus far unheard of, such as genetic engineering and transhumanism, a novel reflection on human dignity may be what the contemporary human rights discourse needs. Such reflection would not only need to reaffirm human dignity as the moral and philosophical justification for equality and other universal human rights, but also would necessarily address the issue from a negative perspective. In other words, it would point out what are the individual and social patterns of behaviour that may constitute attacks on, and abuses of, human dignity. To name but a few, aspects of the contemporary world that should not be left out in discussions of human dignity include: social upheavals that lead to migration and the refugee crisis; violence in the form of war and armed conflicts; detrimental attitudes and ideologies such as racism, that have led in the past to genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity; and other evils such as terrorism, organized crime, human trafficking, unlawful detentions, torture and enforced disappearance. The usefulness of such discourse would be that by identifying violations of human rights one can describe what it means for human beings to be degraded, humiliated and dehumanized, and in doing so to address practically the issue of human dignity and become engaged in protecting the fragile social makeup that has kept past evils at bay for a short while within European western societies.

### **The Holocaust – The European Epitome of Evil**

One of the issues that has shaped and continues to shape the discourse on human dignity since the second world-war was the Holocaust. It has been said that the post-Holocaust world can never return to function within the pre-Holocaust parameters of human experience. When speaking of human life and human dignity, such categories had to be rethought from the perspective of the Holocaust – its unspeakable evilness and the limiting experience it had provided. Within this context, therefore, it is unavoidable to speak of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. A very complex issue, still very much debated, the Holocaust and its consequences is presented by Sandu Frunză<sup>2</sup> as follows:

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2 Sandu Frunză, *Dumnezeu și Holocaustul la Elie Wiesel*, București, Contemporanul, 2010.

- (1) The Holocaust has irreparably altered the European historical consciousness. Nazi totalitarianism, the political regime that led to the Holocaust, is the only known political regime that has made killing a scope in and of itself<sup>3</sup>. The complex process that had killing as its final goal was imagined and carried on with a frightening efficiency: transport, sorting, tattooing, gassing, incineration or common grave. Seen in this form, the Holocaust ought to be regarded the “absolute zero” on any given moral scale<sup>4</sup>.
- (2) In the case of the Holocaust, a European state with a high level of culture and civilization has mobilized all its resources to physically annihilate every man, woman and child belonging to a certain people<sup>5</sup>.
- (3) The Nazi executioners killed without restrictions, for no reason, and the victims died unnecessarily<sup>6</sup>.

In her classic analysis of the totalitarian phenomenon, Hannah Arendt has placed particular emphasis on the latter point. She has observed that the radical or absolute character of the evil that appears in the final phases of totalitarianism can be characterized as absolute precisely because it can no longer be explained using justifications that are acceptable and could be understood<sup>7</sup>. Arendt's observation, of course, raises a much-discussed question: the inexplicability of the Holocaust. If Arendt's thesis is considered valid, then, according to historian Yehuda Bauer, an important distinction must be made. The Holocaust, he observes, as inexplicable as it may be, is either a part of human history, in which case there must be a historical explanation for it, just like for any other event, or it is not a part of human history, in which case it must be regarded as an example of an intervention within human history coming from outside of humanity<sup>8</sup>. Bauer's

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3 Frunză, *Dumnezeu și Holocaustul...*, p. 148.

4 Cf. Alain Besancon, *Nenorocirea secolului. Despre comunism, nazism și unicitatea Șoah-ului*, București, Humanitas, 1999, p. 21.

5 Frunză, *Dumnezeu și Holocaustul...*, p. 149.

6 Frunză, *Dumnezeu și Holocaustul...*, p. 150.

7 Hannah Arendt, *Originile totalitarismului*, București, Humanitas, 1994, p. 7.

8 Yehuda Bauer, *Die dunkle Seite der Geschichte. Der Shoah in historischer Sicht. Interpretationen und Re-Interpretationen*, Frankfurt am Main, Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001, p. 37.

observation shows that in the interpretation of the Holocaust theological considerations cannot be set aside. The problem of the existence of evil in the world, which has always been important to theology, considered from the perspective of the Holocaust, is more acute than ever.

One of the most famous theological interpretations of the Holocaust belongs to Hans Küng, who believes that no theoretical answer can be given to the problem of theodicy<sup>9</sup>. He argues, in essence, that after the experience of the Holocaust, one can no longer conceive of an all-powerful God. Küng thus proposes that in the light of the Holocaust one can conceive of a powerless God, a God in the making, a God who suffers from the moment of creation and is worried about his creation. Evidently, this image of divinity is not foreign to Jewish tradition, for it can be related to the mysticism of the Kabbalah<sup>10</sup>.

Hans Küng believes that Jewish theological interpretations of the Holocaust can be divided into two groups. There are thinkers like Irving Greenberg who argue that the Holocaust is an “orientating event”, especially for modern culture, which shows that humanity without divinity can become bestiality<sup>11</sup>. Other theologians, such as Jacob Neusner and Michael Wyschgorod, believe that no special consequences can be drawn from the Holocaust. This is a “therapeutic” position, one might say. Wyschgorod points out that if the Holocaust ceased to be a marginal phenomenon for Israel’s faith, if it “entered the sanctuary” and became “the dominant voice that Israel hears”, then that voice could only be demonic. Küng follows this view, as well. “Holocaustology” should not be turned into a substitute for theology, he writes. Auschwitz was not a place of revelation, but the modern Anti-Sinai *par excellence*. It was not a new beginning, but radically the end of the bygone era that made Holocaust possible: the European modernism.

## The Dehumanising Power of Evil

Given the space limitations of this paper, a further, extensive analysis of the anthropological effects of totalitarian dictatorships, or of the sociological aspects involved in the phenomenon of collaborationism is not possible. Nevertheless, it is necessary to continue the discussion of evil with three

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9 Cf. Hans Küng, *Iudaismul*, București, Hasefer, 2005, p. 647.

10 Küng, *Iudaismul...*, p. 637.

11 Küng, *Iudaismul...*, p. 633.

examples. We will consider in turn three emblematic victims: the Muslim within the Nazi death camps, the victim of Stalinist public trials, and Adolf Eichmann.

Auschwitz was a place of total dehumanization. At Auschwitz, man was deprived of the meaning of his own death. As put by Giorgio Agamben, at Auschwitz it was not humans that died, but rather corpses were produced<sup>12</sup>. However, it is the thesis of the same author that the essence of the Auschwitz phenomenon is not given by the number of corpses, but by something else: by the image of the Muslim, which constitutes a totally new scenario<sup>13</sup>. In the famous words of Jean Amery, “the so-called Muselmann, as he was labelled in the language of the prison camp, was one who had given up all hope and had been abandoned by his comrades. He no longer had in his consciousness a space in which good and evil, nobility and ignobility, spirituality and non-spirituality, would be faced. He was a walking corpse, a bundle of physical functions, now living in agony”<sup>14</sup>.

For the SS tormenters the Muslims were “useless waste”<sup>15</sup>; a proof of the total dehumanization of the detainees. However, Agamben emphasizes that the Muslim is the “integral witness”. He is the only one who has lived to the end the effects of the bestiality of his torturers. Yet, he can no longer testify. Within him, the possibility of distinguishing between human and non-human has forever been suppressed. This because there is a point in the process where man, even though he remains human in appearance, ceases to be human<sup>16</sup>. This is the point where the Muslim is turned into “monstrous biological machine”<sup>17</sup>. This is the point of total annihilation of any notion of dignity. Thus, concludes Agamben, before being a death camp, Auschwitz is “the place of a still unthinkable experiment, in which, beyond life and death, the Jew becomes a Muslim and man becomes a non-man”<sup>18</sup>.

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12 Giorgio Agamben, *Ce rămâne din Auschwitz. Arhiva și martorul*, Cluj-Napoca, Idea Design & Print, 2006, p. 50.

13 Agamben, *Ce rămâne din Auschwitz...*, p. 36.

14 Jean Amery, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten*, München, Szczeny, 1966, p. 22.

15 Agamben, *Ce rămâne din Auschwitz...*, p. 30.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 39.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 40.

18 Agamben, *Ce rămâne din Auschwitz...*, p. 41.

Although the victims of the Stalinist trials can in no way be equated with the Muslims of Auschwitz, they should provide another telling example of dehumanisation, of nullification of dignity. The people involved were often old party activists. However, according to Slavoj Žižek, as victims, they highlight an important aspect of the nature of totalitarian dictatorship. The Stalinist public process represents the radicalization of the process of “objectification,” that is, of the dispossession of humans of their subjectivity. The essence of the Stalinist process consisted of the rationale that the accused could be subjectively honest; yet, if he was not touched by the understanding of the necessity of communism, his ethical integrity will only make him an opponent of the cause of communism. Thus, despite his subjective honesty, he always remains objectively guilty<sup>19</sup>. In such a universe, there is no room “for even the most formal and meaningless right to subjectivity”<sup>20</sup>.

These rather abstract philosophical considerations of Žižek are perfectly illustrated by the speech of a character from *Жизнь и судьба* [*Life and Fate*], Vasil Grossman’s great novel on the Stalinist era: “Personal innocence is reminiscent of the Middle Ages... But we, the chekists, have promoted a superior thesis, which says that there are no innocents in the world, and no culprits. The culprit is the one for whom an arrest warrant was issued, and a warrant can be issued for anyone. Everyone has the right to an arrest warrant”<sup>21</sup>. In other words, there is not presumption of innocence and no human worth to be considered in the process. Everything, including any sense of human value is in service of, and subsequent to, the political apparatus – the ideological system replaces human dignity.

Adolf Eichmann, the third example, was not a victim, not even in the sense of the “culprits” of Stalinist trials. He was a Nazi perpetrator of evil, one living “at the highest level of wickedness and abusiveness”<sup>22</sup>. Adolf Eichmann was an SS lieutenant-colonel and head of the IVB4 section, tasked with “resolving” the Jewish problem once and for all. Hanna Arendt described Eichmann as the iconic figure of what can be called “administrative genocide”.

19 Slavoj Žižek, *Ați spus cumva totalitarism? Cinci amendamente la (ab)uzul unei noțiuni*, București, Curtea Veche, 2005, p. 83.

20 Žižek, *Ați spus cumva totalitarism?*, p. 85.

21 Here the Romanian version of Grossman’s work has been consulted. See Vasil Grossman, *Viață și destin*, București, Univers, 2000, p. 540.

22 Oliver Lustig, *Dicționar de lagăr*, București, Cartea Românească, 1982, p. 74.

Arendt concludes that the greatest moral challenge facing us when considering Eichmann, is to realise that an averagely normal person, neither mentally retarded, nor indoctrinated, nor a cynical fellow, may prove completely incapable of deciding right from wrong<sup>23</sup>. During his detention in Jerusalem, Eichmann was declared “normal” by the psychiatrists who examined him, and the prison pastor declared him “a man with a very positive outlook”. Even more, Eichmann did not consider himself an anti-Semite.

Hannah Arendt seeks to show that Eichmann is the pure product of totalitarianism insofar as he is a person surrounded by party ideology and propaganda, which provide him with “the safest protection against the words and presence of others, and therefore against reality as such”<sup>24</sup>. Arendt sees Eichmann as “unable to articulate even a single sentence that is not a cliché” taken from the official Nazi propaganda. Thus, his is a “cod-ed language” that prevents him from identifying his activities with what is normally called a crime<sup>25</sup>. Eichmann was not without a conscience, Arendt concludes, but his conscience spoke to him about crime “with a respectable voice, the voice of the respectable society surrounding him”<sup>26</sup>. Seen in this light, Eichmann becomes the epitome of a dehumanising agent. As such, the question that rises, a question that begs an answer, yet cannot be fully answered, is whether the notion of dignity, and the rights founded on it, remain applicable to him.

## Evil – A Theological Conclusion

In light of the above, is there a way in which we can speak of human experience that both, helps make sense of one’s life and regain one’s sense of dignity? Research has shown that the most common feeling experienced by victims of war and violence, torture and abuse, starvation and poverty, racism and genocide, rape and human trafficking, victims of evil in all its forms, is that of absolute powerlessness. This eventually leads to loss of dignity and one’s sense of self-worth. In fact, evidence shows that in the case of prolonged abuse, victims reach a psychological place in which they look upon death as a desired relief in comparison with continued suffering

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23 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann la Ierusalim*, București, All, 1997, p. 35.

24 Arendt, *Eichmann la Ierusalim...*, p. 59.

25 *Ibidem*, p. 98.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 140.

and further dehumanisation. Evidently, this speaks a lot about the priority dignity has above all other rights, perhaps even above the right to life.

Elie Wiesel, a writer of Jewish origins, is the author of one of the most impressive attempts at a theological interpretation of the Holocaust, and consequently of evil in general. In his writings Wiesel speaks of man's and God's indifference in the face of evil. According to Sandu Frunză, Wiesel's texts take the discussion on evil out of the theological sphere and transfers it to the ontological one. The Holocaust convinced Wiesel that evil is not the mere absence of good<sup>27</sup>. Evil is not simply passive, but it acts to conquer. Thus, for Wiesel, the truly terrifying aspect of the Holocaust is that radical manifestations of evil can become a part of everyday life, they can be perceived as the "normality" of life<sup>28</sup>.

Interpreting his own work, Wiesel states that the post-Holocaust generation has invented a new literature, that of testimony<sup>29</sup>. The moral of Wiesel's stories, writes Frunză, is that the presence of evil short-circuits the communication between man and the divinity and explains the interruption of interpersonal relationships<sup>30</sup>. Against this background, there takes form an ethic of responsibility, which has as its starting point the idea that every human being must become aware that she/he is left alone in the face of manifestations of absolute evil and has therefore the responsibility of diminishing its presence in the society, as much as possible.

Wiesel places any possible interpretation of the Holocaust under the sign of the unutterable. This, Frunză points out, is not a mystical entity, nor a metaphysical one. It refers to the inability of words to describe, or the imagination to comprehend, the magnitude of suffering, the degree of brutality, dehumanization, and humiliation encountered in the death camps<sup>31</sup>. The inexplicability of the Holocaust means that we cannot formulate a general theory from which we can answer all the questions that the Holocaust raises<sup>32</sup>. Specifically, Wiesel rejects three possible explanations:

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27 Frunză, *Dumnezeu și Holocaustul...*, p. 12.

28 *Ibidem*, p. 13.

29 *Ibidem*, p. 83.

30 *Ibidem*, p. 5.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 45.

32 *Ibidem*, p. 57.

- ✦ The retributive theology, which says that the evil of the Holocaust was the divine punishment for Israel's sins<sup>33</sup>. However, this perspective cannot be accepted, because there is no sin so great that would deserve Auschwitz as punishment.
- ✦ The messianic perspective, which claims that the amplification of suffering was to prepare the coming of the Messiah<sup>34</sup>. But the Messiah did not come to Auschwitz; therefore, this idea proves as inadequate as the first option.
- ✦ The perspective of the Zohar, which sees evil as the way in which God tests Israel's love and obedience<sup>35</sup>. This would imply that evil is God's doing, applied in order to achieve a greater good. However, no good can result from the evil of Auschwitz. Therefore, this perspective is also unacceptable.

Still, for Wiesel, the Holocaust does not serve as an empirical invalidation of faith in God or of biblical ethics. The fact that good is absent in the camp conditions, however, leads Wiesel to a total revolt against the traditional ways in which the Jewish person approaches God. Nevertheless, Wiesel seeks a way to God even in the most of his revolt. "The suffering and death of innocent children", he writes, "can only call into question the divine will. It can only arouse the anger and revolt of the people. But what if God had intended this from people: to tell of their trouble and disappointment?"<sup>36</sup>. Thus, God is restored at the level of the desire to survive and to confess<sup>37</sup>. In this sense, Wiesel's report on his dialogue with Primo Levi, who considered himself an atheist both before and after the camp experience, is telling: "He saw too much human suffering in order not to revolt against a religion that imposes its meaning and its law on the people. I understand him. And I ask him to understand me. For I have seen too much suffering (the same one) not to refuse to break with the past and reject the inheritance of those who endured it"<sup>38</sup>.

Thus, Wiesel offers a theology of absence, of emptiness, as an alternative to the traditional Jewish views<sup>39</sup>. In it, the connection with tradition

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33 *Ibidem*, p. 114.

34 *Ibidem*, p. 115.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 116.

36 Elie Wiesel, *Toate fluviile curg în mare*, București, Hasefer, 2000, p. 84.

37 Frunză, *Dumnezeu și Holocaustul...*, p.124.

38 Wiesel, *Toate fluviile curg în mare...*, p. 83.

39 Frunză, *Dumnezeu și Holocaustul...*, p.138.

can only be rebuilt on Hasidism, which teaches that we must accept God even as included in the supreme evil, which is presented as the death of the innocent. Furthermore, along with Hasidism, Wiesel believes that it now falls to man to deliver God, through doing good deeds, which prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah<sup>40</sup>. For Wiesel, therefore, biblical ethics is no longer important, neither in terms of the intervention of transcendence, nor in that it provides the link between tradition and community. What takes priority is memory. Memory is the way in which man and God keep each other in existence. Memory appears as the archetype of creation, the presence of the absent, the power of truth<sup>41</sup>. And since the Holocaust is not just a matter of Jewish memory, but of the memory of mankind, Wiesel encourages all of us to get out of indifference and to act according to the belief that every human being must live in the spirit of that which is bright and authentic in man<sup>42</sup>. This is the most one can do in terms of recovering that which has been lost due to the manifestation of evil. Still, as Hans Küng observes, Elie Wiesel has shown throughout his dramatic and prose work that the word "Auschwitz" cannot be adequately addressed, neither through speculative theology, nor through anti-theology<sup>43</sup>. In Wiesel's words, "Auschwitz is not conceivable with God, nor without God"<sup>44</sup>.

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40 *Ibidem*, p. 113.

41 *Ibidem*, p. 140.

42 *Ibidem*, p. 109.

43 Hans Küng, *Iudaismul*, Hasefer, București, 2005, p. 649.

44 Wiesel, *Toate fluviile curg în mare...*, p. 85.

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