

The Coming Evil

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This paper may be somewhat at odds with the general intent of our conference, at least for two reasons. First, I will not address exactly the issue of slow and invisible catastrophes in general, be they environmental, political or socio-economical ones, but, rather, the *apocalyptic horizon* towards which, each reinforcing the others, they likely converge. Second, precisely because the apocalyptic mode of thinking raises a number of philosophical issues, I will assume that we are, indeed, living the Last Days, in order to criticize the kind of moral guilt and collective anxiety in which we are, supposedly, to wait for our abolition. My target will be the dominant view of the ethics of the Times of the End, first sketched by Karl Jaspers, and expounded at length by Günther Anders and Hans Jonas¹). I will rather offer a possible (and hopefully plausible) alternative account of the kind of moral upheavals we might experience, in the period of time which extends from now to the End of Times.

Let me first clarify a number of assumptions before proceeding further. I have little to say about the possible or probable ways the End of Times will happen. But my first premiss is that we do not need to ascertain one by one the specifics of this apocalyptic process to be already convinced that the systematic interconnection of our social and political lives with its rapidly degrading basis in nature constitutes a global phenomenon – or an all-encompassing catastrophe. It goes without saying that it is not a “natural” disaster, when a tsunami inundates a nuclear plant, or when a purely “social” disaster, the unfair allocation of land leads to the deforestation of millions of acres of wet forests. Furthermore, we have come to realize not only the interdependence of all ecosystems (damaging one will end up, sooner or later, damaging all the others), but the geopolitical impact of many seemingly local economic or sociopolitical responses to environmental problems. In this respect, the intrinsic connectedness of all kinds of catastrophes (natural and social) forces us to depart from the classical post-Hiroshima view that Doomsday, if it were to come, would result from one clear-cut causal event, usually an atomic war. And such a war would not only be the death of mankind. The ensuing “nuclear winter” (as people were not long to realize) would also bring about the destruction of the Earth as the ultimate life-supporting system. But the punctual, event-like nature of the final lightning accustomed us to think of Doomsday as a kind of accident, a monstrous one, indeed, but, nevertheless, a preventable accident (for instance, by struggling against the nuclear arms race). What I suggest is the following: the more we understand the interconnectedness of all disasters, the more we can see them as an all-encompassing phenomenon, the less we can think about the End of Times as a preventable *accident*. On the

contrary, even if we could solve a great number of dangerous political, technological, and environmental issues which are still in our reach, we are overwhelmed by the dynamics of past or present decisions which nobody could, or can, see as perilous, but which have now become the interwoven threads of one ongoing and unstoppable *process*. The obvious fact that many of these ongoing disasters are silent, slow, and invisible should only worry us more. It seems, then, that we are fatally driven to the End, as if we had no brake lever to stop the train of this world running amok. One could already read in Jonas the idea that we are living the Times of the End. But for Jonas, these times rather look like a period of “business as usual” – at least for those who do not see the great shadow falling upon us from the future. In any case, the only change we feel (before the nuclear holocaust) is a change in the *moral* circumambient ether of our everyday life. What the perspective of an ongoing apocalyptic process implies is quite distinct: the Times of the End are a period of unraveling disasters piling one upon the others (even though they may be, at the beginning, difficult to define), all of them foreshadowing what the End will be made of.

My second premiss is more controversial. For I suggest that we should seriously consider that our contemporaries are neither blind nor plagued by cowardice, when, repeatedly confronted with the dire consequences of their inaction, yet do nothing. It is a philosophical cliché to lament our insensitivity to the gloomy perspectives we face. This cliché is not new, either: from Jaspers to Anders and Jonas, who mostly referred to the nuclear holocaust, and not so much to silent and slow catastrophes, reviling the passivity or the blindness of ordinary people has become a common place in ethics. But why is it a growing number of us cannot be *rationally* persuaded that *it is already too late*, that we are the last people on Earth? And if so, what moral consequences should we draw from this (very plausible, if not settled) fact? Is it self-evident that, living with a clear awareness that these are the Times of the End, if we do nothing to at least try to remedy it, then our moral existence (not only our essential dignity, but even our daily actions) must be necessarily bad and/or shameful?

Hence my questions: Instead of merely playing with the idea of the apocalypse, let us posit that the End is certain, even impending (as Jonas did). What kind of tangible difference would it make, right now, would we be doomed to become extinct in four or five centuries, or in any period of time which we can think of in *historical* terms? (By these last words, I mean, for example, the idea that between us and the last man, there will be no more time than between us and, say, Christopher Columbus²⁾). It is easy to argue that consenting to our imminent extinction would likely lead to an unprecedented outburst of hopeless and cynical egoism, to an even more ferocious overexploitation of all our remaining resources, and, probably, to destructive wars waged only to postpone for a few years our inevitable end. Actually, thinking this way amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy. But I doubt that it would be the only moral option available. We readily foresee the Evil which comes. But what about the Good? Could the Times of the End help us to reconsider what is *good*?

Let us start with what seems to be the constant, and never criticized premiss of a whole series of philosophical considerations about the abolition of humanity: it is nothing but an unsurpassable Evil. "Unsurpassable" means, here, two things: 1) by definition, there will be no evil after (nor beyond) it, for no evildoer will survive; 2) the End to come will not be the classical apocalyptic End of Times, that is, a parousia (the ultimate revelation of the hidden meaning of things), or Judgment Day, but a dry and flat End, an Apocalypse "without Kingdom". *Retroactively*, such an End would then cancel, or invalidate all the good and meaningful actions ever accomplished by mankind since its inception as a moral species. And we should shudder in advance at the sound of the melancholy laughter of the Last Man, looking backward and contemplating with corrosive bitterness the vanity of what will have been all the morally driven endeavors of mankind until him. There are many ways of stating this idea, but they all lead to the conclusion that mankind, morally speaking, ought to hope and fight for its survival. There is an absolute duty to counteract all the harmful tendencies which may lead to its extinction. As Jonas puts it, if the right to commit suicide remains a debatable issue at the individual level, for humanity as a whole, it is not – and it is not, because it is a self-contradiction. One may commit suicide for the sake of his or her dignity as a person and as a member of humanity, but humanity as a whole cannot forsake its own essence, and commit suicide, because the transcendent moral horizon (which, eventually, justifies the act of one individual as a person) is missing when all the members of humanity (even those who not yet born) are concerned. But doing nothing against our extinction *is* to be collectively suicidal.

Jonathan Schell, in his forgotten best-sellers of the 1980s, pointed out how these abstract considerations would take form in the lived experience of the last people on Earth³⁾. Death itself would die. This motto was popularized by Anders, but Schell stripped it of its metaphysical obscurity. His argument is twofold. On the one hand, he argues that the mass death that the H Bomb can cause differs from ordinary individual death in the sense that it attacks the very possibility of any further birth. It condemns all future living beings to not exist. In a quasi-Sadean formula, Schell describes this as the "second death" of mankind: the death of death as intrinsically part of the process of life and renewal. On the other hand, just like all the new apocalyptic prophets-philosophers, Schell insists on the dramatic alteration of love, of begetting children, or of what would happen to all the different kinds of projections which we make into the lives of the next generations (for example, works of arts, or the "atemporal" messages of spiritual wisdom which somehow extend our punctual existence and the meaning of our lives far beyond us) – would the End become inevitable. Love, he says, would turn into a selfish and impersonal pornographic act. Giving birth would be nothing but a cruel way of pushing more human fodder into the furnace. Creativity, without a future to welcome and sanctify its objects, would fade away; for, as Anders once said, "nothing will have ever been", if nobody remembers it. This is why, supposedly, not only we cannot withstand the idea that mankind could be wiped out from the surface of the Earth, but we should not even try to entertain such a disheartening thought. We ought to see it as intrinsically

repellent, as an intellectual expression of Evil itself.

I took some time to develop this point, because I hope it sheds a different light on another constant of the moral theories of our modern apocalyptic prophets. From Jasper's contention that we must "intensify our anxiety" in order to become more moral, that is, more responsible for our collective fate, to Anders's "duty of anxiety", and, finally, to Jonas's "heuristics of fear" as a full-blown program of ethical reform, one red thread runs through it. It is a vision of what life is worth, or of what is worth living, which presupposes a specific way of being affected by the experience of life. And this affective vision is given as a justification for a radical moral reform of mankind (bypassing, as it has often been noted, the individual's perspectives on what they deem morally good or bad, to the point of implicitly justifying that, in some cases, individual freedom ought to be curtailed). This vision is both given an axiomatic value (with a whole series of moral theorems to be deduced from it), and an experiential value, as an "absolutely justified anxiety" which is, so to speak, the emotional matter into which the apocalyptic philosopher infuses the true (but until now latent) ethical form of "responsibility". Hence, this reference to anxiety tries to have it both ways. Faced with the challenge of explaining how we could infer anything from a purely emotional state, Jaspers, Anders, and Jonas, appear to argue that this anxiety is actually the emotional manifestation of a deep ontological commitment for humanity to continue to exist – which is the towering reason of all reasons. But faced with the challenge to compensate for the weak motivational force of any reason as a reason (for we may lack the will to do what we should, according to the evidence), they rely on what this reason stirs into us at the emotional level, if we take it as a graphic enough depiction of what is to happen. In this closed circle, not to become more and more anxious is dangerously irrational for deep ontological reasons, whereas all our rational activity, if ethically conscious, is bound to accumulate more and more evidence showing us that we should worry more and more.

But if we take this premiss as litigious, we can sidestep what has become, in those last twenty to thirty years, a (seemingly) crucial question: why people *do not believe* that the End is coming, and/or *do nothing* to oppose it (that is, they do not truly believe the apocalyptic prophecy)? Why are they both irrational and insensitive, that is, unmoved by the accumulating evidence? As I suggested, Anders and Jonas tried to surmount the classical roadblock of practical rationality by invoking a new form of ontological (catastrophic) anxiety⁴⁾. But this only resulted in another obstacle. For the "ultimate anxiety" that we all should rationally feel, when faced with the evidence, is precisely what is patently *missing* in our contemporaries. Eschatological indifference reigns. To solve this conundrum, to remedy the weakness of the motivational spring of this new "apocalyptic anxiety", many solutions have been put forward. Some are remarkably astute⁵⁾. They speak for example of the Precautionary Principle, of risk management through game-theoretic analysis, and of the best ways to ground environmental ethics. But they all take for granted that we do not really believe in the final catastrophe, and this is why we do not act accordingly. Or, if we believe in the

evidence, we are not really moved by it⁶). But, so far, none of these solutions has ever produced any tangible social effect beyond a narrow circle of impressed academics.

Sidestepping the current debate about these solutions may seem odd, even extravagant. Are not the horrendous nature of what we are heading to, and the absolute responsibility we should assume in order to avoid it, two analytically connected ideas? However, to confer some plausibility to my endeavor, I will proceed in two steps. First, I will explore how exactly Evil, and which kind of Evil, would finally prevail, as we would come closer and closer to the End. For it is possible, on a purely conceptual basis, to make a few conjectures about how the End will take form at the junction of a whole series of moral, political, and natural disasters. Second, I will directly confront the thesis that we *must* live in an atmosphere of preemptive guilt and anxiety in order to face the challenge of collectively opposing the catastrophic course of events in which we are caught. On the contrary, I will defend two ideas: 1) that we are fully capable of thinking about our own extinction without necessarily panicking at the ethical level, and 2) that living in the Times of the End may even empower us with a much better version of what is morally good.

For, I do not think that we should worry about the End as such. Were it to come, in a thousand years or in a couple of centuries, by definition, most of the critical issues raised by this new Apocalypse without Kingdom would have already been solved: there would be very few survivors, and they would be left with very little to save. We should, then, focus on the period before – the one starting just now, and extending to this crucial point in future history at which a more self-conscious mankind will see in full light when and how it will end, as clear as a fixed day on a timetable. For, in this period, worries about the End will increasingly confer an extraordinary intensity to the last people's choices. A highly plausible option is the following: we will witness an unbounded, a wild unleashing of egoism and irrationality. Hungry and scared people, probably crushed by the unfair and dysfunctional political institutions born out of shortage and insecurity, will cling to their miserable lives, and start to kill each other *en masse* to tentatively secure the last available life-supporting systems of our planet, or for the mere semblance of a protracted survival, and, finally, for nothing. I regard this as a credible scenario because I do not make any conjecture about what we will do tomorrow morning, but I only generalize from what we are observing *right now* to what will constitute tomorrow morning the basis for all possible actions. The Times of the End start today, not tomorrow (actually, they may even have started with Hiroshima and Auschwitz). And what we see now does not give us a lot of reason for hope in the future behavior of mankind.

But what a modern reader of Sade could learn from the French moralist is that people would not be long to realize that the impending end of everything of value (life, moral virtues, love, meaningful endeavors, etc.) may become, by a bizarre twist, the last form of *enjoyment* available to us. Instead

of passively witnessing the disappearance of all what is good, generation after generation, and then, individual after individual, why not turn this sad process into a lustful, perverted frenzy of self-destruction? Why not turn all that will prove to be only worse and worse into radiant Evil? ⁷⁾ The closer the End, the more passionately humanity would resort to the most atrocious, the most excessive, and the most demented ways to secure for the last “Sad Few” the very last means to continue for even a few more years of vicious (self-) destruction. A Sadean moralist would hold that the meaning and the glamour of the Times of the End will certainly not consist in cautiously securing the means of a delayed ending, but in the lust attached to stealing them, and murdering their rightful owners. Moral vices, cruelty ranking first, and abuse would no longer be the mere side-effects of universal despair. For the survivors, they would be the prime movers of the experience of being (still) alive. It follows, in my thought experiment, that as we come closer to the End, the idea of humanity as a whole would finally crumble. People would see no other death than their own individual death. Hence, people would not see any other suicide than their own private termination, contradicting in a final acting out Jonas’s thesis on the impossible suicide of mankind. For, as life would lose all interest (out of sadistically exacting what will be left from our fellow survivors), who will attach a high price to one’s existence? Consequently, all the rational and conscious individuals to whom humanity would little by little boil down would prove suicidal.

So be afraid of the Times before the End of Times. Be very afraid. Not because of the supposedly unbearable idea of mankind’s twilight, but because of the concrete and terrible events which might drive and even precipitate it in a spiraling intensification of Evil. And because the driving force, ethically speaking, of this process of self-destruction, may be, at least in part, *the very certainty attached to the ineluctability of the End*.

What does this mean? One disturbing thing, to start with, is as I said above, that *this sinister process might have already begun*. We are living this period of time in between the moment people start to realize that they are heading to the abolition of every single thing of value, and the moment at which the date for the Last Day will be set once and for all. Hence, instead of complaining about the insensitivity of our contemporaries (they know, but they do not feel anxious the way they should), why not suspect, at least in many of them, a totally different perspective: a still unconscious, or, rather, a non-explicit leaning towards the sort of Evil I was alluding to? One amusing anecdote: I read that in the United States, you can now buy a device, to be fixed on your exhaust pipe, which actually increases the quantity of toxic smoke you release in the atmosphere. So, in some Southern states, a handful of truck drivers mocking climate change as a liberal hoax, proclaim their inalienable right to live their lives the way they do, and will do forever. More seriously, the utter ferocity with which growing social and economic inequalities of the most scandalous proportions are being sheltered from any attempt to correct them, even minimally, speaks for itself. And when we speak of elites “in denial”, when it comes to climate change, why don’t we speak, at least for the

best informed, not of denial, not of self-intoxication with pseudo-science, but of plain, conscious, and deliberate lies? We underestimate the *rational* interests many people do have in *aggravating* the social, political, and environmental imbalance, *if the End is a settled (and impending) fact*.

The key reason why the Jaspers-Anders-Jonas's view of a morally commendable anxiety about mankind's end is, I think, utter nonsense, is that they do not take into account that the very same assumption brought forth by the heuristics of fear (the End nears, and it is real) will also feed precisely the self-destructive process it is meant to fend off. So, in my critique of them, I do not stand with those who contend that the way Jaspers, Anders, and Jonas praise anxiety will rather stifle our intentions to counteract the current trends of mankind towards self-destruction. Jonas probably comes clean of this accusation, for he always drew a clear distinction between pathological anxiety and responsible anxiety (though he hardly provides us with a criterion). Rather, I underscore that Evil is intrinsically a part of human nature, and as Sade pointed out in materialistic and atheist terms, and with a deep moral understanding of what modern individualism implies, the less we worry about what comes after us, the more we are inclined to take chances, and to indulge in our most dangerous and lustful passions⁸⁾. Only substitute Sade's refutation of the Afterlife with our very realistic prospect of an Apocalypse without Kingdom, and his 18th century moral vision of the egoism of the individuals by the full force of what neoliberal societies can actually bring about. So, intensifying anxiety, à la Jaspers, or trusting the cathartic powers of the heuristic of fears, à la Jonas, can always *backfire*.

To make this clearer, let me draw a parallel with Lacan's disturbing comment on a famous moral vignette by Kant⁹⁾. Kant compares two cases: one in which a lecherous man is offered the opportunity to spend a night with the object of his lust, but at the price to be hanged the next morning, and the other, in which the same man is threatened with the gallows if he does not give false testimony against some enemy of his Prince. For Kant, in the first case, nobody doubts that the man will recoil, by contrast with the second case, in which the same man will confess that he should, at least, be able to face the possibility of his own death, even though he lacks the courage to say no to the Prince. But Lacan laughs: if spending the night with the object of his lust means to be allowed to do to her all what he wishes – for instance, raping her in a gruesome way, and then, slowly cutting her into pieces –, who can be so sure that the certainty of his hanging will prevent the lecherous man acting accordingly? Let us go further: the certainty of his death may paradoxically *induce* him to seize the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to unleash a full-fledged perversion. All the more for mankind; especially if mankind boils down to the very last individuals (us?) and if they are all objectively aware that their death is scheduled for tomorrow morning.

Hence, if I am not mistaken, the Jaspers-Anders-Jonas's contention that we should live in a kind of preemptive guilt, in order to prevent the apocalypse which looms, appears not only as sad and

depressing (who wants of a life of perhaps useless anxiety, especially if these days are the last ones to be lived on Earth by sensible beings?), but even as dangerous and counterproductive. What we need is not guilt, or anxiety, or collective responsibility, but, rather, not to feel intimidated by all the actions to be undertaken, and the clear-sightedness to confront the hidden or implicit ways of Evil at work (for not only the good people know of the End, *but the bad as well*, who draw contrasting consequences from the same premiss). I agree, Jonas's anxiety, on classical Heideggerian lines, mediates all self-appropriation, all resoluteness, and brings about the effective freedom to act in crucial circumstances. So, it may generate something like courage and lucidity as its by-products. But it is much too ambiguous for the intended purpose, for it fails to capture what I would qualify, in defiant terms, as *the emancipating power of the Times of the End*.

Here, I would like to open up scope for a parallel inquiry. Because the radical possibility of Evil has not properly been taken into account (including its unthinkable or yet to be discovered forms), the necessary parallel reform of what we deem good and valuable is still pending. But in the following account, what does not differ so much from the Jaspers-Anders-Jonas's vision, is the idea that Doomsday looms. We should not think of it as a remote event. On the contrary, we ought to interpret the present manifestations of Evil (and especially those linked to silent, slow, and invisible catastrophes) as the immediate forerunners of the End: there is a causal link between now and tomorrow in the spiraling of disasters which turns the ethical postulate of Jonas (for it verges, sometimes, on the thought experiment, fictionalized for salvation purpose) into an ever-nearing actual apocalypse.

What do I mean, then, speaking of the "emancipating power of the Times of the End"? Exactly *the same* as what the evildoers (who are to multiply as the End nears) mean when they see their own lives (and their fellow survivors' lives) as being "without a day after", and, consequently, when they feel "free" to enact the worst possible deeds. I even suspect that it is unwise to try to circumvent their ethical stance. The freedom to do good deeds, in the Times of the End, must rest on the same grounds as the freedom to do evil ones. True, all the good expected from the postulate at the heart of the heuristics of fear paves the way for a contrary Evil. For, some will say, "it is already too late", and it has maybe been too late for quite a long time to try to salvage anything meaningful. In any case, why take the pain of a probably useless good and go after the long shot? But the certainty of the End also allows for a symmetric logical conversion (from *modus ponens* to *modus tollens*, without delving here into the technicalities). For at any given moment of choice (bad vs good), moral rational agents can see that choosing the path of evil is also doomed to fail to secure more long-term security for them as individuals, or to definitely put off the End for all. Hence, choosing the evil path is but an *understandable* vital reaction to hopelessness (a way of exacting a form of excitation from despair). It is not rational *per se*. The very same agent might just as well reason that he or she has never been so free to be absolutely good, for any motive like self-interest, or the

advantages drawn from his or her egoism, will likely bring nothing to him or her tomorrow. But this better moral agent faces two challenges. First, he or she must be able to confront the End of Times exactly in the same terms as the evildoers to come (if they are not already at work!): as a settled fact. Being only anxious about its imminent advent in the (indirect) hope that it will not happen is not enough. Thus, in contrast to Jonas, the better agent must not recoil from thinking the suicide of mankind as a tragedy in progress, so to speak. Second, this agent will have to find the ways and means to obtain a form of both moral and affective satisfaction in choosing the path of good, even though it will leave no trace to remember, nor set any example for future generations.

In the final phase of this essay, I will insist, first, on the fact that, notwithstanding what German apocalyptic philosophers have repeatedly stated, we are perfectly able to face the eventuality of our collective extinction without any moral panic – that is, without losing our dignity, or forfeiting our reason, even though it is obviously a deeply emotional issue.

What we ought to learn to live with, I suggest, is the idea of “a good life with no tomorrow”. It differs from “living like there is no tomorrow”, for the latter locution usually suggests hopelessness; it anticipates a future, and inescapable conviction, so that we only ought to take advantage of the moment before the hammer drops. But, at the End, the hammer will drop on the hammer as well. The former idea of “a good life with no tomorrow” calls, on the contrary, for a reappraisal of what it means to lose everything of value. But it so happens that we did face, in the long course of human history, times in which the issue of losing all what was worth living (or a moral symbol of it) materialized in a most concrete form. Maybe we should draw a lesson from these moments. In a letter to Carl von Gersdorff on June 21st, 1871, Nietzsche describes the deep moral impact the rumor that the Louvre in Paris had been set ablaze by the communist revolution had upon him¹⁰. Not only unique works of art, but entire periods of the cultural history of mankind would have been lost. The run-of-the-mill reading of Nietzsche’s letter links it to the melancholy feeling which was his dominant mood at the time, with the “Autumn of culture” extending its shadows all over modern civilization, even if the Louvre had actually not burnt. But a lesser known French reader of Nietzsche, Pierre Klossowski, offers a different account, more in line with Nietzsche’s philosophy¹¹. Klossowski ventures to say that the horror and gloom felt at the event could only be one dimension of Nietzsche’s reaction. Some other passages tend to show that, as terrible as it could have been, the burning of the Louvre (and other similar catastrophes) should be regarded as *tragic opportunities* to open up new possibilities of creation, and for the affirmation of life. This Nietzschean detour helps us to better characterize what we fear so much to lose, at the End: not exactly the ultimate meaning attached to the existence of mankind, but its achievements as *objectified* as a treasure trove of meaningful works of the past, towards which we should display a form of burdensome and meritorious faithfulness. Losing them would be losing the best of past men, it would make their endeavors and their accomplishments null and void. By contrast, what we

do not lose, at any point, is our ability to reaffirm the power of creative life, against our memory, so to speak, that is, against the moral prison of our veneration for the past, against any fantasized trustworthiness towards our elders.

Hence my proposal: once *cured* of our imaginary and fetishist objectification of the “ultimate meaning” of humanity through its works of arts (and, by extension, through all its spiritual achievements), we would only retain this creative power. And, by definition, this power is no smaller today than it was yesterday, or than it could be tomorrow. It expresses itself throughout a variety of forms, some already definitely forgotten, some others not yet conceived of by even the most perspicuous minds, to the point that we could actually face the entire destruction of the Louvre, and, in our grief, not despair of what we or the next generations will paint. Should we fail to address this challenge, the blame would fall solely upon us (or upon our children), and we would *deserve* our nothingness. But, once again, would our future be limited, would there be only a few generations of artists or thinkers to come after us, this both vivid and vital experience of exerting all our creative potentialities would not be curtailed. This Nietzschean detour lifts a good part of the weight off our shoulders. We are not confined, when it comes to the last things, to a narrow mentality of museum keepers. We are not in essence the guardians of the memories of all those, whose life preceded ours; we are not bound, either, to push further on their endeavors. A truly Nietzschean view of this illusion would even suggest that, on the contrary, only those whose life is already poor in meaning dream to personify for the next generations those who “will have been” their indispensable elders, their models, or, at least, their counter-models. They project or, rather, evacuate in the future the onus of making sense of their senseless existence of today, because they lack the strength either to make it meaningful, or to silently exit the stage. And to keep the illusion alive, they behave as if, to them, the whole of human past is meaningful.

Such a view, which only requires crediting the better people of tomorrow with at least the same chance for grandeur as the evildoers, entails a major revision of our everyday attitudes. If we are actually living Man’s twilight, it means, among other things, that we should take very seriously the idea that we do not create anything anymore *for our posterity*. We ought to find our satisfaction in what we do today *per se*. What it will become later on is contingent, but contingent in a way it has never been for the people who lived before us (who were not acting in the shadow of their absolute abolition). Devising all human projects “with no tomorrow” (without the forlorn prospect of eternity) would deeply affect us, and, most probably, would call for a complete reconsideration of what it means to be an artist, a political leader, a thinker, a father (a mother), etc., or anyone whose meaningful actions stretches beyond one’s lifespan. The issue of begetting children is crucial, and all apocalyptic prophets resort to it to maximize our feeling of responsibility. It is striking that none of them ever considered that we do not make children with the idea that, someday, they will morally evaluate our actions. We make them because it is part of a pleasurable activity, we raise

them because we like interacting with them, and we hope that it will be just the same for them (to the point that would our children ever behave as the moral censors of what we did in bringing them into the world, we would have a reasonable ground to say that they miss the whole point in relation to their *own* children, or that something essential is missing in the transmission between generations). Our responsibility towards future generations, this apocalyptic cliché, detached from these basic considerations, is but a scarecrow. Not only do we invent out of thin air a collective of future moral partners which are bound to inherit our narrow mindedness of museum keepers, but we impose upon their shoulders (happily, only as a figment of our imagination!) the ethical burden to live and feel just the way we did, and not otherwise. Once again, the moral shift I regard as essential to a reform of what we deem morally good requires us to detach ourselves from any objectification or, rather, fetishization of what we inherited from the past. It certainly implies a moral upheaval, in which the joy of creation (to take it as a paradigm of all meaningful activity) consists more in the act and its inner significance than in the resulting work and in its outer value. Let me make, *en passant*, a connection with Freud. In a footnote of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud says that the ancient were more prone than us to value the drives (the sexual impulses *per se*), whereas we, the modern, value the object, and we often falter under the weight of the many idealizations we attach to it¹². We might rediscover how wise the attitude of the antiquity was.

My last words will call your attention to three paradoxes.

The first is the following: this Nietzschean-Freudian contestation of the privilege of anxiety as the one and only commendable emotion for us, who are living the Times of the End, could be shared by all evildoers, present or to come. Sexual and aggressive impulses are exactly what they rely upon in their passionate reclaiming of the last means to enjoy life as Doomsday nears. But it is precisely what I intended. For it means that whatever will come, the last people on Earth will not necessarily envision the past history of humanity as a “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing”. Even their very last actions could be meaningful to them, performed with joy and serenity, as they would be increasingly *freed* of any expectation or judgment from a non-existent posterity. Thus the fight between good and evil will not, either, necessarily end up with the triumph of Evil.

Hence the second paradox: the less we are dependent on the imaginary preservation of the human project as a whole, in the Jaspers-Anders-Jonas’s vein, the less we are sensitive to eschatological bullying. I am fully aware of the prophetic grandiosity of such pronouncement, but if the End nears, the meaning we can confer to its advent will remain the one of a constant struggle between life-asserting and death-asserting tendencies. The issue is not already settled whether we will have to feel shameful about the End that we will make for ourselves. Furthermore, by a bizarre twist, the

energy to cope with the Evil which comes (an Evil which Sade himself could not have anticipated in his wildest fantasies) may spring from a self-conscious *detachment* from all eschatological fears. As if, as the End nears, the worst danger for mankind would be its inability to lose everything. In a sense, it is only by facing what the evildoers take for granted (the idea that there is no meaningful future) that we *may* turn the tables, and give another interpretation of what is really good (in a good “with no tomorrow”).

The third and last paradox is a bullet against philosophers which might ricochet and wound us as well. It is a plea for ordinary people, or, rather, a plea for a form of rationality which may well work undetected under the cloak of the so-called “moral insensitivity” or “epistemic idiocy” of our contemporaries. Actually, it seems there are two options, and, of course, they are not mutually exclusive. Either a good number of our contemporaries *are* evildoers, well aware of our future fate, and taking advantage as long as they still can of a situation not yet so disastrous at the expense of the generations to come. Unfortunately, I think that we should worry very much about this possibility, because, if the End is both imminent and certain, as I hold it to be, it may lead to radically new excesses, leaving far behind us the most outrageous manifestations of human Evil that we have long witnessed. Or, at the other end of a spectrum where shades likely blend smoothly into each other, our contemporaries are people who do not see why they should embrace for their own sake any “apocalyptic anxiety”, but, rather, they just focus on life-asserting behaviors without worrying about the day after. It might be, then, that ordinary folk may know best; they act in a very reasonable way, to the extent that it should bring about a serious reconsideration of what we deem good in the Times of the End. And philosophers, instead of banging their heads against the non-existent conundrum of common people’s seeming indifference to eschatological stakes, should rather learn from them.

Notes

- 1) K. Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, being the English trans. of *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen. Politische Bewusstsein in unserer Zeit*; Piper Verlag, München, 1956; G. Anders, *Endzeit und Zeitenende: Gedanken über die atomare Situation*, Beck Verlag, München, 1972; H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, The University of Chicago Press, 1985, being the English trans. of *Die Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1972
- 2) In the famous last pages of the *Naked Man* (1971, English transl. by J. and D. Weightman, 1981, p.693), C. Lévi-Strauss reminds us that our species, and our planet, and the solar system, and our galaxy, are all to disappear in the future, leaving nothing behind to remember, and to nobody. But I am not speaking of stellar eons, which are, by definition, impervious to the human quest for its own meaning.
- 3) J. Schell, *The Fate of the Earth, and The Abolition* (First edited by Knopf, 1982 and 1984), Stanford University Press, 2000.
- 4) For a good reason, by itself, cannot “entail” (in the sense of “trigger”) any action. No action will ever follow from the premises of a practical syllogism the way a logical conclusion follows from the premises of

a theoretical one.

- 5) For example, Jean-Pierre Dupuy's hypothesis of the reality of the future within a cybernetic loop of anticipation, an idea explicitly designed to salvage Jonas's "heuristics of fear")
- 6) We may be witnessing a conceptual shift, in this regard. In the 2000s, people were deemed unconscious about the actual possibility of a catastrophic termination of humanity. They were regarded as non-believers, or not properly informed. Nowadays, the problem seems rather that we do know, but we do nothing because we are not anxious about what is going on the way we should be. We are no longer unconscious, we are insensitive.
- 7) Think, for instance, of the Nazis, well aware that the war was lost (with all its foreseeable consequences for the German people and its dignitaries), and, however, stopping or diverting the trains headed to the frontline loaded with ammunitions in order to let the convoys of Hungarian Jews reach Auschwitz in time.
- 8) There is irony, here, when one thinks that Jonas was a scholar well versed in gnosticism. One of the oddest (though marginal) expressions of this philosophy is that people, if the prophecy of Apocalypse is true, should not refrain from their evil deeds. On the contrary, the worse they sin, the quicker the End of Times, and the advent of the Kingdom. Of course, sinners would be damned. But all the others would enjoy a prompt salvation. Now, if we are heading towards an Apocalypse without Kingdom, what are we at risk to lose, if we sin without restraint?
- 9) Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, Abbott's translation, Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1898, p.118.
- 10) In *Nietzsche Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, G. Colli & M. Montinari (eds.), De Gruyter, München-Berlin-New York, 1975, vol. II, 1, p. 204.
- 11) P. Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, English transl. by D.W.Smith, The University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- 12) "The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honour even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual activity in itself, and find excuses for it only in the merits of the object." S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, SE VII, p.1476.

