

ON ANONYMITY AND INDIFFERENCE

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Abstract

The paper articulates, in broad strokes, an idea of responsibility that is affixed to a general attitude of availability and service. That to respond to, that to be responsive is to breakthrough the barriers of complacency, it is to be open to the unsettling appeal for justice amidst injustice, and that to exist is not to be only for oneself.

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There seems to be a misguided notion that social concern is something beyond one's immediate community. And it seems that when an academic institution like ours is responding to social concerns it would act on the level of policy and the motivation behind it would be that of a requisite. But what does it really mean to respond to social concerns, to problems which confront not just the institution but us as living human beings? What does responding mean? And what does concern really mean? And by further extending the reflection, we may ask the question what is the social? I would say, with the of risk sounding trite, that the social is not something beyond, not an abstract conjured by our thoughts for the purpose of discussion or an object of investigation or study or publication, nor is it a name in a certificate. It is not something beyond us and we need not look too far to find it. The social is in our midst. The social is us, we. The social need not be outside our immediate day to day experience, nor is it or beyond our very community, nor one's home, nor one's place of work. The social is in fact the neglected and the abandoned in our very lives, it is the one's that are in need of care within the very orbit of our day to day affairs. The social is in the very "others" that we encounter everyday, the very people we experience everyday. It is an encounter not in a sense of a duel or competition but of an event, a taking place, an event that is a revelation. It is a revelation in the sense that in the encounter with the person, the "face to face encounter," the Other is revealed to me. It is in the encounter with a friend, a colleague, the boss, the daughter, that unknown neighbor, or the face of and the hand that ask for spare coins, it is the document or file of the human being, the concrete human being whose fate may rest on the file or document, whether she be hanged or given pardon, whether she be separated or be united with her child, whether she gets the medicine that she or her ailing mother needs, whether she gets to eat something for the day, it is the living human being that breathes, that needs, that loves and caresses, it is this encounter that I am revealed as a human being and as a social being. The social is the Other. How could she be not this? And she is more than this.

But when do people become indifferent? How is it that people refuse to see? How is it possible that people fail to respond to the call for aid, to the call of the Other? And who is this Other? We may say that the Other is not the powerful, not the mighty but the destitute, for her poverty is in her eyes, in her hands, in her very gestures. She is the signified in the cry, the very person behind the voice that says "help me." But her plea is also manifest in her soft resonance, in the reverberations of her voice, in her movements, in the very body that speaks of her emaciation, her concreteness is the flesh that sinks to me, to my very flesh and being that says "help me." Destitution could be more than monetary, and so the response to the call of the Other is more often times not that of money. Suffering could come from a manifold of causes and more manifold is the experience of pain, of suffering: illness, periods of convalescence, the unbearable moments of ache, the agony of the soul and of the heart, the tears of loneliness and

helplessness. And so we see in the cry, in the faint, in the collapse, in the call for aid, in the tears of loneliness at moments of helplessness the revelations of the human being's destitution. What is expressed in the event of the encounter with the Other is that the Other is revealed to me as Other, other than me, someone who is not me, who is totally different from me. The Other may not literally utter the words "help me" but she is revealed to us in her naked poverty, in her tears, in her voice, in her gesture, in her movements, in her fragility. The fainting, the impoverished state, is revealed to me in the event of the cry for help. But the event is more than an event, more than a lone episode. It is here that the unbearable shame of myself is revealed to me by the Other in her naked poverty. But it is also my destitution for in my failure to respond to her plea myself is revealed to me as unjust, I am unjust.

The Inconvenience of Responding

We are allergic to the Other, we are allergic to the destitute, we are allergic to the stranger, to the impoverished, to the hand that begs, to the grimy body, to the incarcerated, to the emaciated and ill, but also to the fraught, to the heavily burdened, to the troubled. Why, why do we turn our backs to them, why do we turn our eyes away? Why do we avoid them, why do we sometimes, or most of the times, abhor or even repel them? Is it because we see them as ugly? Is it because we see them as inconvenience for they disrupt the normal flow of our routine, for they give an unsightly smudge on our well-defined life, for they stain our well-managed and well-maintained landscape? The Other for us is unsightly, distasteful and inconvenient. That is how we see the Other. But where does this come from, this feeling of inconvenience, the detest for the unsightly, the abhorrence for stranger, a detest for the Other, where does it originate? Would it be possible that if we locate this root cause we could understand and even perhaps "cure" ourselves of this ghastly vision, this lens of ours that sees the Other as someone to be fended off?

A well-managed and well-maintained landscape gives us a sense of being secured. One is comfortable and at ease, one is at home. But to be at home is to be calloused. To be calloused is to shut everything from the outside, to fence everything in, to be the center, to be the solitary center, to cling to the comforts of one's world, a world that is thought to be created by himself alone. And therefore to see the world as something created by one's self alone is to have a mindset that is uncaring and aggressive, possessive and colonial. To possess and to colonize and to expand and secure one's domain is the frame of mind that drives the spirit of the self that sees only its ego, an ego-self that is the center of everything, and therefore egoistic and narcissistic. Could it be that this attitude is the very same attitude of capitalism and imperialism? Could it be that self-centered ego as an ego that sees itself as *superior* is the very affliction that repels, abhors, hates and is blind to the Other?

The Convenience of Maintaining

By superiority, the superior would always be blinded by its identity, by its identification with its character, with its position, with its chair. The chair which stands for a character is mistaken for his own humanity, or rather, it has defined his character and humanity as a human being, the character of a boss, of a lawyer, a politician, a bureaucrat, a peddler. He identifies himself with the character, and the identification becomes narcissistic and egoistic, he becomes the center, the I-center. The world is a price to be won, everything is for the taking, the ideals and principles of people are inessential for he has learned in his conquest that everything has a price. Seeing himself as the center he sees himself as the superior, above others, and so it feeds him of his claim to superiority. Being mighty and powerful he becomes repressive. Thinking himself as mighty and powerful the superior represses the subordinate.

The superior-subordinate relation is a relation of etiquette and most often a means-end relation. The relation is not ethical, precisely because it is a means-end relation and the interaction is a relation of reservation, of ritual, of categories, of policy, of profits, of benefit. For the superior sees its subordinate not as a person, or only partly a person. But for the most part he sees her as a possession, as an equipment. The superior would always unload itself of its workload, of its burden to the subordinate, and the very relation is the ritual of this unloading and the subordinate would always be at the receiving end. Because it is a means-end relation the superior seizes the

subordinate. The superior, intoxicated of its superiority, tries to possess the subordinate by seizing her time, her space, her interiority, as many as possible, as often as possible, as exhaustively as possible. He is conscious of it. He operates to capture her in her entirety. He may greet her or show concern for her once in a while but the subordinate would always notice there is no sincerity in the superior or that the subordinate recognizes the power, would always see the superior as powerful. The cordial greeting is a ritual and a reminder of who is the superior, who is mighty, who has power. When the superior notices that the subordinate is approaching him for a favor or assistance he would deploy his evasive skills.

Dribbling

Dribbling is a special skill. In sports such as football or basketball dribbling is a skill for evasion and delay whereby the ball is handled well by the player against opponents. It is a means to run a play of offense by moving the ball well within one's reach without the opponent taking it. The opponent is powerless if the dribbling skill of ball handler is outstanding. But dribbling is not just a skill in sports. It is a skill used by the superior to the subordinate, by the intelligent to the ignorant, *ng mataas na tao sa maliit na tao*. As it is in sports so it is in handling the Other. Dribbling is applied as a tactic of evasion and delay. It is an offensive, but an offensive that offends, that is indifferent to the call of the Other. Deflection is indifference, for one does not want to be disturbed, one doesn't go out of one's way. It is the failure to respond to the call. This failure to respond have in fact infected the *automat*.

Confined to its task of repetitive work the automat follows the day to day routine. The world is made by and revolves around the routine. Routine gives a feeling of security, of being at home. He nurtures the routine for within it he is at ease, well and secured. Even if there is an urgency, a need for response, a call for help of the Other, he responds only with reservation, only with a certain reserve. He may hesitate and give in to this call once in a while but only to the extent that his actions are only within the perimeter of his well-managed world, he acts only to the extent that he secures himself and his interest. He never forgets himself. He clings to his ego. His work only revolves in himself and so he handles others with a certain coldness and distance.

A document is more than a piece of paper. Surely, it refers to something. And often times, it is about something more concrete, real, tactile and alive. A case file for example refers to this real, tactile and living person. A dossier of an orphan, a document of an indigent patient, a referral letter of a person in need of medical aid, a case file of a detained person, an endorsement letter for an employee's benefit and pay.

Repetitive work most of the time blinds us to the person referred to by these documents and makes us calloused and deaf to their urgent call. The failure to see that these documents are more than just pieces of paper could perhaps spring from forgetfulness and fatigue, or from the loss of the joy in work, or from the recurring routine which brings about dullness of the mind, body and spirit. But it could not be also be due to the security brought by convenience and complacency, work that perhaps no longer fulfills and accomplishes goodness and self-worth but only maintains one's existence. One is merely earning one's wage for existence, the time clock is his time. One is merely existing, existing by maintaining one's convenience and security, of maintaining one's well-managed and well-maintained world.

The Anonymity of Home

To maintain and operate at the level of maintenance, of mere survival, is to work at the level of complacency. Just to go about day to day and engaging in one's world with an attitude of business as usual is to secure the distance between one's self and the Other. To go about at this level is to act on the level of the crowd. Acting on level of the crowd is acting on the level of self-maintenance, it is the level of not choosing to see and not responding to the call of the Other. It is a level of distancing and disinterestedness, a level of not committing, it is the level of anonymity. To be anonymous is to maintain, to be at home, and to secure one's domain. The overworked social worker, the stressed secretary, the corrupt judge, the profit mongering business owner, the uncaring boss, all has committed in going about doing their business by deflection, unburdening oneself of such

“inconvenience” of reaching out, of going out. The Other becomes anonymous because one has become indifferent. But the self could also be acting at the level of anonymity, at the level of self-convenience, of self-centered interests.

Indifference as a Loss

But to be at home is to be at a loss, a loss of the ability to respond, to reach out, and to welcome the stranger, the unexpected stranger, it is the failure to respond to the call of the Other, and therefore to be inhospitable. One could easily lose one's self in the thick of things, in the hunt for convenience and power, in managing well one's self interest. Browning one's own nose is a conscious activity, it is an activity which is fueled by the hunt to possess, the desire to expand one's dominion and a hankering for stability, it is the drive to secure one's self the convenience of a world that is thought to be self-made. That one's world is thought to be only the world that is connected to blood-ties, or within the orbit that bestows privileges and gains, of power, security and convenience. One could only look at tragedies, at death and disease, to see that all these quests for security would only bring about false security.

The thinking that one is autonomous, that one is free and can stand on one's own is to forget that one has from the very beginning up to the present is within a relation, a relation with the Other. No one is a self-made man. One had always someone who cared for him and aided him and answered the many calls for help, from the subtle and implicit to the most obvious and apparent. There are even the bolts that came from the blue, the surprisingly there who gave us aid, lending assistance whether it be a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger, or the wind, or the rain, or the tree that gave shade. The one who cared and gave us aid, who answered our call, relieved us of our pain, assisted us in our labors, ministered to us in our confusion, abetted us in our times of dispiritedness, served us in our poverty, alleviated us from our misery.

But we have to take note that the encounter with the Other, the Face to Face encounter, is an invitation, an invitation for us to respond to her call, to her plea, to her cry. It is a situation that we be no longer be ourselves, that we no longer cling to our selfish egos in a sense that we abandon our well-managed and well-maintained world, that we lose ourselves and be responsible for the Other. The circumstance, the event, of this encounter is an opportunity to be responsible. But we can never be responsible if we only think of responsibility in terms of what we do. Rather, responsibility comes only when we ourselves be responsible for Other. A radical responsibility that promotes the good without return, of losing one's self for the Other, and therefore doing the good.

It is the good that I must do and so respond to the Other not for myself but for her. It is this unbearable shame of myself revealed to me by the Other in her naked poverty. But it is also my destitution for I am unjust. My injustice is revealed to me by Her nakedness, by her poverty, by her destitution, by her misery, it is the unbearable shame that reveals to me mine and the Other's destitution, our unclothed destitution. It reveals itself in the impoverished as impoverished, as emaciated, as naked, as in need of food, of shelter, of clothing, of warmth, of caress, of embrace. It is this that calls to our being. It is this that captures us and overpowers us. It is here that the Other is revealed as the most High for the Other's power is a power that stings to my soul and makes me forget that the world is all about myself. It is here that our shame and our injustice is revealed by this most High. And so to be human is to regain one's humanity, but it would not be just about caring for myself, or my household, for that would be selfish. It is also about caring for the colleague, the neighbor, the elder, the relative that has not much, the river, the tree, the file or document that needs attention. To be human therefore is to experience that one's humanity is a humanity-in-relation. And concern is more than a concern for one's interest. A truly authentic concern is a responding to the Other, a responsibility for the Other. But a sincere response is response that does not seek a return and gain merits for the self. If an institution like ours is to act and to respond to social concerns then the measure should be no other than this: that it must be open to the plea for justice and that its actions should be devoid of any self-serving ends.

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