Book Review | *Narrating Evil: a post-metaphysical theory of reflexive judgment*

Maximiliano E. Korstanje

Published online: 11 January 2011
© Maximiliano E. Korstanje 2011


Undoubtedly, catastrophe, genocide and moral disaster are strong terms which throughout the XXth century awakened humankind from its slumber, above all afterwards the Second World War. One might speculate that evil can be narrated by means of the survivor’s testimony, but this seems not to be the only means. Social imagination weaves different versions and nourishes an array of discourses respecting to the reasons behind events. In addition, it is clear how our own moral cosmology leads us in fabricating reflexive judgments about the meaning of events that are often enrooted in the political discourse of dominants. This moot point is one of the main issues of *Narrating Evil*, an insightful book authored by philosopher María Pia-Lara and recently published in Argentina by Gedisa Editorial (2009). With respect to this valuable project, she examines the connection between the psychological effects of disasters and the notion of justice with theory of reflexive judgment.

Taking her cue from other scholars of the caliber of Arendt, Habermas, Adorno and Levi, Pia-Lara argues that evil can be described by means of social narratives that allow reconstructing the causes of moral disaster. The disaster evokes the convergence between the human needs of justice and psychological trauma by means of a ethical perspective. Events such as Auschwitz or even the bloody dictatorships in Latin America are examples of that. To some extent, our author develops a new term for referencing those damages suffered by survivors of these disasters: *moral damage*. As in Auschwitz, the sorrow and pain of victims cannot be expressed in words. For describing their torment, new words must be coined. Terms such as *Genocide* originally coined by Lemkin (Gen = ethnicity and cide = cleaning) and *Totalitarianism* by Arendt were examples of this. Both scholars coined two neologisms by referring to events that...
had no reference in the language before. The reflexive judgment sheds light and helps philosophers to understand the impacts of moral disasters and the reasons behind them. Pia-Lara recognizes that sadism and passion for cruelty are two important aspects of human life. Precisely, the reflexive judgment orchestrates the necessary collective efforts to comprehend the spectrum of evil, which is nothing other than the presence of contingency. The main thesis throughout this book is that imagination permits survivors to express whatever was previously indescribable in the language of survivors. By adopting new linguistic terminologies that create their version of history, neologisms exhibit a human propensity to understand what has no precedent.

Following this, the problem of evil put us in a quandary of difficult solution. To some extent, Arendt already demonstrated that sometimes the face of evil coincides with the banality of a simple person (see the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem). The power of evil sedates the moral consciousness even in scholars. It is important to note that this was exactly the troubling role played by M. Heidegger during the Regime of National-socialism in Germany. The exacerbation of instrumentality works as a mechanism capable to shape the moral judgment of people paving the ways for the advent for authoritarian governments. The fearful nature of Nazi’s atrocities suggests that not only they have been planned, but also executed with downright impunity and moral indifference. The suffering of others has been silenced under moral indifference.

Based on the belief that totalitarian regimes need of a radicalization of politics for gaining more legitimacy and authority, Pia-Lara argues that the tergiversation of ethic is often accompanied with a relative perspective varying on time. This leads us to an interesting question: what today is ethic may very well be unethical tomorrow? Totalitarianism emerges whenever we try to judge the past under our current lens creating a new discourse and depiction of facts. These types of policies, carried out by politicians, are chiefly aimed at a broader audience to promote their own point of view as the only one possible. This belief marks the turning point between ethnocentrism, always present in all societies and totalitarianism. The moral basis for the radical destruction of otherness needs a certain complicity to the extent of localizing to a palpable enemy to be blamed of frustrations lived the hosting society. The process of construction of enemies can be created by means of the articulation of a false-conspiracy where the other starts to be gradually dehumanized. In this conjuncture, our language plays a pivotal role in re-elaborating new meaning and terms to legitimate the totalitarian policies. The resulted process of dehumanization corresponds with a compulsory need to build otherness according to our own interests.

In sharp contrast with S. Zizek, Pia-Lara acknowledges that it is strongly necessary to enhance our moral current understanding of disasters to construct an archetype whose guidelines can illuminate lay-people in darkness. Moral evolution is the only way to prevent calamities such as Auschwitz, but it is important to say here that there is an implicit danger when officials in quest of further legitimacy, politically manipulate the
spectrum of moral damage simply because these policies created a show-case and spectacle of disaster that paved the ways for the advent of new stronger ones. The reminders of Auschwitz or the consequences of Argentine’s dictatorship should be once again placed under the lens of scrutiny. Otherwise, our memory runs the risk of falling under the monopoly of State, which promotes only a one-sided vision. In this conjuncture, critical philosophy should examine and discuss to what extent victims do not become executioners; simply because boundaries among ones and others seem to be very tight.

Under this context, most likely the book of María Pia-Lara corresponds with an innovative project that explores the profundity of trauma with the needs of revenge and the social-structures where a moral disaster may certainly take root. This represents valuable efforts to connect the criticisms of the Frankfurt School with the postmodern exceptisism of S. Zizek and Neomarxian School, a point underexplored in specialized literature. While Zizek calls for a restraint from reacting before the moral cynicism of late-capitalism, Pia-Lara is convinced that scholars should take the stance that moral evolution is possible by means of ethical criticism. Philosophy, far from being part of politics, should take an independent role to provide an appropriate discourse to prevent the disaster from happening again. This is exactly one of the main contributions of Pia-Lara to the understanding of made-man disasters, a more than valuable and recommendable book for philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists.

References
