

GOODNESS DOES NOT FALL FROM THE SKY

Go on through the lofty spaces of high heaven and bear witness, where thou ridest, that there are no gods.

Seneca the Younger

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There are many ills plaguing mankind nowadays. Two of these ills are especially persistent: indifference and falsehood. They were juxtaposed by Marian Turcki in the speech he delivered on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. In his speech, this historian and former prisoner of the camp stressed that indifference to distortions of history was particularly dangerous, because it might cause us to forget the lessons of the past, allowing the evil that had happened to return, to befall us again. Certain demands or messages for the modern-day world follow from his speech: first of all, that we should not be indifferent and, secondly, that we should safeguard the historical truth. Can we stay true to them? Do we even understand them?

Not indifferent

Who among the listening audience and addressees of Marian Turcki's speech might say that they are indifferent to the history of Auschwitz? The trouble is, probably no one. Consecutive speakers and authorities are urging us to show engagement and remain alert, addressing these appeals to the conscience of today's people. It appears, however, that they often – all too often, or perhaps even always – miss the target. They affect our emotions – we are moved, and we clap our hands, but they do not reach our conscience. Why is that? Maybe we do not understand what is being said to us, what we are being urged to do? Maybe we no longer know how to become involved?

The answers to these questions are very complex, but they can be summed up in a very simple way: the problem experienced by modern-day people boils down not to indifference but to excessive involvement. The set of those to whom the appeal “Do not

be indifferent!” applies is actually an empty set. Today, there are no indifferent people. Everyone is involved in something, engaged in an uncontrollable, unharnessed, incessant way. If we are not sufficiently involved on one particular issue, it is not because we are indifferent, but because we are more involved elsewhere, because our involvement is dispersed and fragmented, continuously being fostered, stimulated, and organized.

If we use the slogan “Do not be indifferent!” to urge people to react to violations of some norm, we must say that people these days do not react to certain situations not because they are indifferent but because they are overreactive. They are constantly being stimulated and urged to react by an army of stimuli, countless needs, and numerous values that are suggested to them every step of the way by all forms of modern product and political marketing. There is no indifference in our world, there is only involvement. No one is indifferent, they are merely committed to something else.

Proper involvement?

The objective, therefore, is not about getting involved, but about getting involved in what is more important. Consequently, we need to rephrase the eleventh commandment stated in Marian Turcki's speech. Instead of saying “do not be indifferent,” referring back to Roman Kent, we should say “engage yourself rationally” or “engage yourself, above all, in the most important things.” However, it appears that establishing this hierarchy of importance is now more problematic than ever before. Such efforts are hindered by at least three crucial factors determining our modern-day identity: the romantic factor, the existential factor, and the digital factor.

Isaiah Berlin, a prominent 20th-century political scientist, believed that Romanticism had marked the most important turning point in the history of civilization. Consequently, he divided history into the pre-Romantic vs the post-Romantic. Humans have always had an affective side. In Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, however, it was balanced by reason,



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whether human or divine. This prompted the right order of things and the intensity of emotional involvement. But the past 200 years or so have witnessed ever-growing significance of the role of emotions in our culture. Experiencing has become a value in and of itself, with human beings turning from *homo sapiens* into *homo excitus*, creatures that are constantly agitated by something.

It is less and less about what causes our emotions – what matters is that we have emotions, many of them, as many as possible. Feeling emotions is what determines our humanity. This situation has led to the fundamental inflation of the intensity of experiences. These days people use the word “dramatic” or “tragic” to describe every second experience they have, and psychotherapists have plenty of clients teetering on the brink of a nervous breakdown because their superiors at work spoke to them in a raised voice. The thing is, they are not pretending – they really do experience everything so intensely. Consequently, reminding them of the tragedy of the Holocaust does not resonate in their souls in the way historians would wish – they simply do not have the right scale at their disposal.

In the mid-19th century, when Max Stirner announced his rebellion against great abstractions and any cultural norms and values that limited his freedom and self-determination, he opened up the road to the second major factor determining modern-day identity – something I referred to above as the existential factor. Existentialist thought and literature are characterized by the culmination of the peculiar modern process of liberation from the imperative of values. Humans are not defined in advance by any norms, moral rights, or values, ranging from hedonistic to spiritual. Existentialists cried loudly that the world responded to our attempts to understand it with cold and deaf indifference – it offered us no answer, so we must formulate one ourselves.

Modern-day human beings are defined by the conviction that values exist not out there, in the external world, but within people themselves, who define them with their choices caused by intuition, feelings, yearnings, and the search for some mirage of “them-

selves.” No one determines in advance what we regard as important, valuable, and ethical – there is only our own, limited and changeable, human judgment. Consequently, if we are urged to get involved with a just cause, to stand up for what is right, such appeals are somewhat reminiscent of the conducting of an orchestra in which each musician has a slightly different score. The phenomenon has been recently studied by the American sociologist Jonathan Haidt, who presented the findings of his research in his book *The Righteous Mind*. He argues that there is no such thing as *the* righteous mind – rather, there are various righteous minds, which differ from one another and are each situated within a different axiological ecosystem.

Finally, the third factor determining the modern-day condition of humans is electronics. We are not only *homo excitus* – we have also turned into *homo electronicus*. We live in an information society – never before have we been informed so intensively and so persuasively about so many things at the same time. The main medium of this message is electronics – we are constantly “plugged into” the world through sounds and images, constantly participating in what is happening there, constantly reacting to something. Numerous analyses and studies (*The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* by Nicholas Carr, *Digital Dementia* by Manfred Spitzer, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* by Adam Alter) show that we pay a peculiar price for this: we have become distracted, less capable of delaying gratification, of reflection and analytical thinking, less resilient in the face of adversities and therefore more sensitive and vulnerable.

In order not to be indifferent towards what is important, we need not only to have the right hierarchy of values but also to be careful and reflective – we must know how to pick those particular situations that signal violations of important norms out of a whole avalanche of events. This is exactly what modern-day people cannot do. Constantly attacked with stimuli, flooded with images and sounds, they cannot switch off, step back, pick one event and reflect on it in a focused way and in the context of norms. It turns out

again that it is not indifference that plagues us but digital carelessness, distraction, susceptibility to manipulation, and constant anxiety caused by addiction to stimuli and the related gratification. Young people are especially susceptible to this. Psychologist Jean Twenge describes this in her book *iGen*, analyzing how significantly the common use of smartphones has changed the functioning of young people.

Faithful to the truth

Just like modern-day indifference is not the absence of personal engagement but rather engagement on behalf of something else, so being unfaithful to the historical truth does not mean turning away from the truth but rather turning towards a different truth. In the introduction to *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel pointed out that historical truth is not just “factography,” a faithful and journalistic recreation of facts, but rather an outcome of rational reflection. We select significant facts from history, combine them into sequences of events, and these are the things that we remember. We then use such memories as the basis for our identity and our understanding of the world.

Again, as is the case with involvement, it turns out that history as practiced in his way and historical truth as understood in this way are determined by the ability to choose. But our choices are suggested to us by strong emotions, for example because what we see is what is consistent with our fears. After that, we make our choices, under the influence of more or less arbitrary values, based on what we like more, favoring the events that bring to the surface what we find important. Finally, our ability to make choices and careful assessments of the importance of two events is disturbed by our lack of distance, the excess of information inundating us, and our inability to single out a specific event.

Identity modification

It is true that Auschwitz did not fall from the sky. But if it were to repeat itself, this time it would not fall from the sky, either. We should not fear ordinary forgetfulness, carelessness, and unawareness of history. What we should fear is the construct of our identity. In his highly-publicized book *Critique of Cynical Reason*, contemporary philosopher Peter Sloterdijk analyzes in detail the cultural and identity-related processes that took place for example in the Weimar Republic and facilitated the Holocaust. Those were highly complex processes that embraced the whole of culture, all spheres of life rooted in our awareness, in how we perceive ourselves and the world in which we live. In order to counter them, we also need a complex strategy of action, because we have a problem with modern culture and identity, as we did back then.

In her recent highly publicized book *Not for Profit*, Martha Nussbaum showed that one of the most acutely-felt modern-day ills involves a certain lack of care for the development of the ethical sensitivity of human beings that becomes visible at every level of education. In the pursuit of novelties, economic growth, and disruptive technologies, we forget that these are just additions, tools needed for good life, but if they are not founded on properly cherished values, they may turn against us.

This is why in order to engage ourselves in what is important, to remain mindful of facts and faithful to historical truth, we need broad collaboration between teachers and ministers of education all over the world. The purpose should be to develop a system of education that would reduce substantially the above-mentioned determinants of modern identity. I want to say that today’s education at every level should rest upon such foundations as work on emotions, values, and participation in the digital culture. Without well thought-out and research-based education in these three fields, any lessons that we teach to our children may prove dangerous in the future, and we can already see signs of this process.

Modern-day people cannot cope with emotions, they easily become hostages of such emotions, and they have a disrupted scale of emotional reactions. In addition, they are lost in the world of values, unable to create their hierarchies in consultation with others. Finally, they are slaves to digital tools, which limits their ability to creatively participate in the real world. Without across-the-board changes in the three foundations of modern-day identity, more and more urgent calls for us not to be indifferent, to become involved in important matters, regardless who makes them, will fall on deaf ears. We cannot hear them now, and wise education is the only thing that can help people do so.

Auschwitz did not fall from the sky, but neither do the values that protect us from Auschwitz. They emerge in cultural practices. As the motto for this essay, I chose the two last verses from the play *Medea* by the Roman Stoic Seneca the Younger. The Ancient Stoics believed that every man has on the one hand great potential for a good life full of reflection and on the other hand a propensity to become lost in all sorts of things. The titular heroine of the tragedy inspired by Euripides’ play becomes engulfed in anger caused by wounded pride – in her frenzy she goes as far as to kill her own children, including the one she carries in her womb. The quotation is a line uttered by her husband, Jason, who wants to say that becoming lost leads us to a world in which there are no norms and no gods. Seneca believes that the only thing that protects us against this danger, which is hidden in human nature, is culture, which he understood as training in the reflective experiencing of values. ■