

This is not the best of all possible worlds. Undoubtedly we can imagine better ones. The world we live in is governed by the law of hunger and the life contract we sign is embroiled in violence.

But there is another kind of violence, one that characterizes us as a species: wielded not out of necessity, but pleasure, greed, or more simply, inertia or indifference.

What will it take for us to understand that nothing is self-contained? What will it take to realize that what concerns us is much more than what safeguards us as individuals?

Take Friedrich Nietzsche, in Turin, weeping, throwing himself upon the neck of an exhausted horse that, on the verge of collapse, was barely withstanding the coachman's lashes. Biographers consider this episode to be symptomatic of the philosopher's madness. That a movement of compassion toward a non-human being is considered a symptom of insanity is a clear indication of a sick society.

If we want to recoup our health as a species, it is essential we replace the morality of reciprocity ("Do not do unto your neighbor whatever is injurious to yourself") with an ethic of interspecies compassion. To expand the framework of our belonging. Make the other, all others, human and non-human, our fellow creatures, our semblable, our *semejante*. Go from the particular to the universal. Transcend the group. Make a breakthrough.

To curtail arrogance, beliefs, false virtues, and spread global understanding and respect: Is this possible?

And, while it isn't possible for a world designed as a self-supporting organism to sustain itself without violence, can change be brought about, at least on our part, without violence?

The State of Violence

The Rules of Hunger

Usage of the term “violence” is usually limited to acts of intentional aggression. But this is a restrictive use of a word that, if we consider its etymology, simply means “abundance (*olentia*) of force (*vis*).” The state of violence is, by all outward appearances, the natural state. We are part of a world in which the rules of the game are simple: they are the rules of hunger. Those who want to continue existing have no choice but to abide by them. (Of course, continuing to exist is not the only possible option: that life is a basic good is not something that can be affirmed under any circumstances. To cease existing sometimes is, as I understand it, one of the few acts of freedom we are able to perform.) Every being survives at the expense of others. This is the primary rule. Every living being feeds on other beings, which is why any act of survival is an act of violence. Defending oneself is an act of violence as well. Both the aggressor and the victim are trying to survive, and both need to use violence in order to do so. On the other hand, we live on an unstable planet, prone to all sorts of movements. What we call “instability” is nothing but the planet’s way of maintaining equilibrium. When these natural movements affect us we call them “catastrophes.” We

perceive their violence as an attack and respond to it by trying to defend ourselves.

But there is another type of violence that has nothing to do with survival. A gratuitous violence, exerted for pleasure, hatred, or ambition. It is this violence that distinguishes the human animal from the rest. I am not saying anything new in stating that the history of humanity or, at least, of Western society is the history of compulsive desire. This essay could easily be turned into evidence of related atrocities: it'd be enough to tack on a few convenient linkages—accounts of massacres, executions, rapes, accidents, catastrophes, torture, all sorts of crimes, current and past. Even a glance at the pictorial representations of past centuries in Europe should be enough to make us tremble. Tortures, bloody executions... Upon seeing them, one might say empathy didn't exist. Does it exist now? Back then, people were killed in public, amidst either laughter or terror, and with some god as their witness. Today, killing is (pre)recorded. There is no laughter, no god, no terror: only indifference. We contemplate news of a massacre with the same curiosity, mixed with indifference, with which we contemplate those paintings. Stories of torture also fail to affect us. We don't feel our blood run cold upon hearing them. The hair on our skin doesn't stand on end, we don't feel our flesh flinch with the memory of some hurt, of some wound. At most, a slight shake of the head or a sigh. What is the reason behind such indifference? Or is indifference our natural state of being?

What Concerns Us

I have always been amazed by the narrowness of our framework when it comes to outrage. We generally get outraged and protest only with respect to things that touch us personally. The rest doesn't seem to concern us. As if proximity and distance were ethical parameters. When what we understand to be our rights are restricted we become easily outraged, but we don't get outraged about situations in which others—who are almost always the vast majority—don't even have the right to have rights. We don't stop to think—habit is perverse company—that, in this world, some people's rights come at the cost of others' blood, and that our most minute gestures hinge upon widespread imbalances. We get outraged for certain reasons, always, but not always with good reason (justly) and, generally, not on a broad enough scale. Mostly, we defend what—or those—we understand to concern us, to affect us. We feel offended or attacked when injustice is committed against our person and its adhesions, that is, against those (beings or objects) which in some way we feel belong to us; and belongings are preserved and defended within a rather narrow framework, outside of which indifference reigns.

Much has been said about the culture of spectacle and the media's responsibility when it comes to indifference. It's true that we take in facts *cum* images like we take in fiction, through the same conduit and in the same format: that of the screen. It's also true that, in becoming news, what has happened loses its singularity. Figures are interchangeable, filed into folders with labels reading:

“migrants,” “terrorists,” “the abused,” etc.: serialized merchandise. No singularity, reduction to (universal) concepts. Decontextualized, people become characters with no other life than the lone fragment which represents them. Of course, some images will get us to cry out, but this merely corresponds to what Kant referred to as a judgment of “taste,” not a judgment of knowledge. It comes from an aestheticized emotion, not an ordinary one. Formally seduced by art’s ruses, we respond to form thinking we’re responding to content. This is the perversion of artistic language. Without art, on the other hand, without formal appeal, other images, holding a mirror up to the same reality, leave us indifferent. We can continue sitting calmly on the bus or in the subway while facing a poster of emaciated children. Because, beyond the possible affect the images may produce, it just so happens *we understand* that it doesn’t concern us.

What does it take for something to be of our concern? Surely everyone has heard someone else exclaim, in front of the television screen, “I know that person...” Or “That place is around the corner, I was just there this morning!” And you must have noticed a certain inflection in the voice, as if something had suddenly taken its toll—and seen the person examine the screen with greater interest, as if looking for something familiar, something that could build a bridge between the external and the internal... All of a sudden, she was concerned.

The main reason for our indifference, those of us who partake in societal “well-being,” is that the violence (that our nations carry out) always occurs Elsewhere: on distant

shores or, simply, the basement of the neighboring building. Violence occurs Elsewhere, but is exerted globally.

Global Violence / Global Outrage / Global Nausea

We all know or are aware that banks have our accounts at their disposal as a means to finance the arms industry. What we don't know, of course, is which bullet or anti-personnel mine will explode thanks to our savings account or who will be the victim, but we can imagine in which regions it will take place. Or we should, being that global violence, itself a violation of territories without territory, in fact concerns us. There are no borders in this game; the limits are others or there are none. Global violence is not a war but a dirty game in which there are those who dictate the rules on one side of the board and, on the other, pawns. Corrupt governments with puppet rulers, deals fixed among elites, secret societies without any visible leaders, population displacements, blackmail, misappropriations, undue expropriations, massacres... The universe of the global market is no longer Kafka's castle, but a very well organized business, and the consequences, for millions of beings, are neither Kafkaesque nor virtual; they are simply real. A reality imposed upon the flesh, with pain, with exhaustion. And we are involved in all of it, whether we want to be or not. Our nations and governments are, our economy is. But all this is obvious, certainly, and you will tell me, not without reason, that what we have to do—us philosophers—is not so much to think about it as to think from it. However, I think even knowing this,

we risk losing sight of reality as it stands. Thinking about a financial crisis without thinking about the gears of consumer society, thinking about local outrage and its immediate causes without thinking about the global reasons behind it, doesn't strike me as being logically sound, or ethically correct.

So I return to the question: What will it take for us to feel that all of this is of our concern? To avoid indifference? For us to care that what we do here has its repercussions on the Other Side? We grow, we feed, we "make progress" atop heaps of corpses, over and above the misery and suffering of entire peoples, human and non-human, who are foreign, alien to us. And we aren't outraged by it. We don't go out into the streets to protest the fact that our companies displace entire populations who resist the establishment of factories and the stealing of their land, nor because agribusiness corporations relentlessly torture millions of animals in farms and slaughterhouses.

I know these things are uncomfortable. We don't like to be made to feel guilty. "It wasn't me..." "What can I do about it?" or also, "Now isn't the right time, with everything we're dealing with right now..." But shouldn't we first ask ourselves what is going on and why? We can't let pressing issues be the reason we lose sight of others, because "others" are the context of what is in close proximity and if we don't remedy the context, what we do with what is in close proximity will be of little use. In other words, nothing is self-contained. Only a global vision and global outrage will be able to stop global violence, the disaster it entails; or mitigate the global nausea it produces and, in its place,

foster local actions that revert, if not into well-being, into better conditions on a global scale.

Perhaps indifference is caused, as someone once wrote, by the sheer complexity of relationships in a globalized world which has ruptured the link between our actions and their consequences. Perhaps our imagination and our actions have become out of step, rendering us “incapable of imagining their consequences and, therefore, of being morally responsible for them.”¹ Maybe that’s it. When complexity increases past a certain point, like Descartes’ ten-thousand-sided polyhedron, things become impossible to imagine. Or, more simply put, this generalized desensitization arises from the difficulty we have, in global society, of establishing the relationship between our economy—from which we derive the series of quotidian gestures that, taken together, constitute our way of life—and the horrors endured by other beings Elsewhere.

It is time to awaken. Today, outrage cannot be limited to defending one’s private interests. Because, yes: for everyone, it is a matter of surviving, only some of us/we continue to live at the expense of others who barely survive.

The Semblable

I have used the verb “to awaken.” This makes me feel a bit messianic, which bothers me. “It is time to awaken,” I said. And I would already be regretting saying it if it weren’t for the words of Derrida that now come to mind: “The *unrecognizable* is the awakening.” This phrase belongs to the

Seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign*, where the author responds to a comment made by Lacan² with respect to cruelty. What is typical of cruelty, according to Lacan, is that the human being always targets a semblable, even when he directs that cruelty toward a being of another species. The fraternalism of the semblable, Derrida believes,³ frees us from any ethical obligation, the duty not to be criminal and cruel to any living being who is not my “fellow” (semblable) or who isn’t recognized as such.

And, certainly, if we look back, we would see that taking up a defensive position vis-à-vis unlikeness (difference, dissimilarity, otherness, *dissemblable*) is how European nations were able to justify the genocide of the Amerindian populations as much as the enslavement of Africans or, until not very long ago, the subjugation of women. And, even now, it’s also by sheltering ourselves in dissimilarity that societies of the written word allow ourselves to displace, steal, and reduce to misery those people without a written language, from whose survival strategies we could learn, if only we lent them our ears and attention. Yet, on the contrary, they are silenced.

Derrida puts it like this:

A principle of ethics, or more radically of justice, in the most difficult sense, which I have attempted to oppose to right, to distinguish from right, is perhaps the obligation that engages my responsibility with respect to the most dissimilar [*le plus dissemblable*, the least “fellow-like”], the entirely other, precisely, the monstrously other, the unrecognizable other. The “*unrecognizable*” [...] *is the beginning of ethics*, of the Law,

and not of the human. So long as there is recognizability and the fellow, ethics is dormant. It is sleeping a dogmatic slumber. So long as it remains human, among *men*, ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic, and not yet thinking. [...] *The “unrecognizable” is the awakening.* It is what awakens, the very experience of being awake. The “unrecognizable,” and therefore the non-fellow [*le dissemblable*]. If one trusts and binds oneself to a Law that refers us only to the similar, the fellow, and defines the criminal or cruel transgression only in what it is targeting as fellow, that means, correlatively, that one has obligations only to the fellow [...]. More obligation toward men than toward animals, more obligation toward men who are close and similar than toward the less close and less similar (in the order of probabilities and supposed or fantasized resemblances or similarities: family, nation, race, culture, religion). One will say this is a fact (but can a fact ground and justify an ethics?): it is a fact that I feel, in this order, more obligations toward those who closely share my life, my people, my family, the French, the Europeans, those who speak my language or share my culture, etc. *But this fact will never have founded a right, an ethics, a politics.*⁴

That it is in fact so does not mean it should be so. The moral of the “fellow” (*semblable*) rather seems to arise in order to justify the radical fact that, in defending my “fellow neighbors”—that is, those I am close to, those who get close to me—I am defending my surrounding circle, I am defending myself. This, in effect, does not found an ethic, nor does it correspond to an ideal of justice. Because justice, in an ethical sense, transcends group legitimacy.