

The novel "The Feast of the Goat" depicts the "feast" of tyranny in the Dominican Republic under the rule of a military dictator. As the author, Mario Llosa, said, it is no strict interpretation of the events that took place in the history of the country. However the life stories of the characters, enmeshed into political turmoil, appear highly realistic. There is the dictator, drunken with power and expressing the anger at own aging body by tyrannizing those around him. There is a woman, who as a 14-year-old was raped by him under the consent of her father, a bureaucrat attempting to save his career by this virtual human sacrifice. Finally, there are the revolutionaries, former government officials who chose the future of their country over personal prosperity and life itself. The story culminates in the group of officials assassinating the dictator and being executed by the secret police. Llosa describes atrocious tortures in the prison chambers, designed to break both the bodies and the minds of the revolutionaries. Most of them do not survive. Almost none convey the secret information to the police. All of them lose the extremely privileged social position they had enjoyed as the dictator's allies. However, their plan is successful. In a couple of decades the people of the country, used to the rule of law, are barely thankful to those heroes of the past. So were all the sacrifices worth themselves?

The moral choice between taking part in the evil that ensues all around you or taking action against it is probably one of the hardest universal choices each and every human being can be faced with. Ethics has been trying to answer this question for thousands of years. Probably the best proof of that is the attention Plato gives to the question in "Gorgias". The dialog goes like this:

"POLUS: So you'd rather want to suffer what's unjust than do it?"

SOCRATES: For my part, I wouldn't want either, but if it had to be one or the other, I would choose suffering over doing what's unjust."

In this essay I would like to analyze the quote above, pointing out its premises. I will then argue that both of the premises are correct. I will proceed to argue that the choice that Socrates makes between committing evil deeds and suffering under them is the ethically right one in view of the premises. I will turn to existential philosophy to do that. Finally, I will show that suffering under evil is unavoidable if one chooses to preserve own ethical conduct and make the world a morally better place. Then I will conclude.

1. Socrates' answer

In "Gorgias", as in many other works of Plato, the character called Socrates represents the stronger side in an argument. However, it is considered unclear whether Plato's Socrates is identical to Socrates the philosopher, who was Plato's teacher, or a representative of Plato's own views. So I would like to consider the "Socrates'" answer to the question above also Plato's answer and Plato's ethical position. This is the position which I would like to defend in my essay.

Firstly, it is stated that neither unjust conduct, nor suffering are desirable. Secondly, "Socrates" proclaims that doing what is unjust is still more undesirable than suffering. So the premises for his view are as follows:

1. Suffering is undesirable
2. Unjust conduct is undesirable

Finally, the position itself is:

Unjust conduct is more undesirable than suffering.

I would like to turn to each of these statements in parts 2, 3 and 4 of my essay respectively. Then I will try to show that suffering is, alas, necessary if one is coherent in viewing unjust conduct as undesirable.

2. The pursuit of happiness from the view of ethics

In considering suffering undesirable, Socrates holds the same position as many philosophers throughout history. However, it is no axiom, as, for example, in Christianity, suffering is viewed as a way to cleanse oneself of sins and is sometimes cherished. I would like to defend Socrates' view from the position of utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham.

Firstly, the instinct of all life is to seek happiness and avoid suffering. We see how plants grow to reach sunshine from under stones or other obstacles. Animals pursue pleasure and avoid pain. We, humans, also instinctively try to protect ourselves from pain and pursue happiness in its various forms from satisfaction with food to love and friendship. There are moral intuitions, universal all over the world (according to R. Murdoch), which aim at helping the others avoid suffering and achieve happiness. For instance, hospitality, generosity and pity for others. If we believe that the human condition is to some extent universal, then we should wish ourselves happiness as well as we wish it to the others. An ethical doctrine is only valid if it serves to help people (including one's self) achieve happiness and avoid suffering. Jeremy Bentham thus suggested utilitarian ethics, according to which any action is deemed moral or immoral considering the happiness and unhappiness it brings about. If the happiness outweighs unhappiness, the action is moral, as moral conduct should maximize human happiness and minimize suffering.

There are some approaches to ethics that proclaim that one should only attempt to bring about happiness of others (altruism) and never mind personal happiness. For example, such might be the approach of some Christian monks and nuns, following the rules of their cloister or order (the Benedictines and others). The premise for that is the Christian attitude of altruism and loving your neighbor (and enemy). However, I believe, this view is incoherent. For if you deprive yourself of everything that, as you intuitively know, might bring you happiness, you might sacrifice so much that your own suffering will not allow you to efficiently help others. Such is extreme hunger as a result of fasting or illness as a result of restless hard work. In addition, by helping others, you might derive pleasure from it: be contented with yourself, give purpose to your life, enjoy vicariously and empathically others' happiness. If you try to deprive yourself of that, you will not be able to help others. As Spinoza argued, own happiness is an effect of behaving morally towards those around you. So utilitarian ethics, aimed at maximizing human happiness, can be considered not only intuitive for all life, but also coherent.

3. On "unjust" conduct

Now I would like to argue for the validity of the premise "Unjust conduct is undesirable". But firstly, what is meant by "unjust" in the quote? On the one hand, it might be the quality of solving an argument in such a way that each side gets what it deserves. This is the kind of "justice" pronounced in courts when economic disputes are considered. However, I believe, by "unjust" Socrates means "immoral", "not according to personal moral intuitions or principles". This more broad understanding can be grounded by the fact that, according to the quote, someone may likely "suffer" under unjust conduct. For instance, in a financial dispute between two large corporations, no one is actually "suffering". However, if we consider the sphere of ethics, where one acts in view of own moral intuitions or principles, a lot of unethical actions are deemed such because of the "suffering" they cause to someone. This is the logical approach if we adhere to utilitarianism. For example, by

smoking alone a person does no unethical deed: although some suffering is caused in the form of damage to one's own health, this suffering is "balanced out" by the satisfaction the smoker gets (in the smoker's opinion, of course). On the contrary, if one smokes in presence of others, especially vulnerable small children or seniors, this action is often deemed unethical: those around one become "passive smokers" and suffering is caused to them in form of possible damage to health.

So let us consider the term "unjust" in the essay equal to "immoral". I would like to give the word immoral a sort of subjectivity, for as morality is a sphere where we use our conscience and exercise free will. So I would like to consider "moral" something which is deemed such by a person using her moral intuitions or moral principles. If one adheres to the utilitarian principle, "immoral" is for him that action which does not follow that principle. However, people might have different views on morals and, consequently, on own conduct. As the premises for "Socrates'" opinion are those that agree with the utilitarian principle, I would like to use it in judging what is moral or immoral further in this essay.

Why is immoral action undesirable? Well, firstly, it is such because it results in creating more unhappiness or depriving someone of happiness. We should also consider the suffering that the person who has committed an immoral deed experiences as guilt, feeling of impurity or shame. "Socrates" would not like to give himself the torture of bad conscience. He would even choose other forms of suffering over it.

4. The great ethical dilemma

In order to show, why suffering, intuitively the most avoided thing, might be more bearable for "Socrates" than bad conscience, I would like to turn to the philosophy of existentialism. As well as the utilitarian ethics, existentialism has a premise that all human beings share a certain human condition, a special position in the world not shared by animals or lifeless objects. The understanding of this condition helps us to see why two seemingly compatible forms of suffering: suffering under someone's immoral conduct or as a result of personal immoral conduct are actually incommensurable, and the second one should be avoided at all costs.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger ("Being and Time") presents human life as a combination of three planes of existing in the world -- he uses the word "Dasein", literally meaning "there-being". The first one is facticity. The facticity of our existence are the facts of our life over which we have no control. For example, the events of our past, which we can not anymore change or influence, belong to facticity. As an adult remembering own childhood, one can not in any way alter the fact that one was born to a working class family, or that one was treated badly as a toddler, or that one received catholic upbringing. Such circumstances we should simply take as given. At being subjected to facticity we are similar to non-human beings, such as stones or trees, which can not move away from the place they do not like, or animals, which can be viewed as instinct-driven automats. The power of uncontrollable instincts is facticity. The biological capacities of the human body are also facticity.

The second plane is thrownness. This is the world in which we find ourselves. What the people around us are doing, what the fashions and the ideas popular in the contemporary world are, what cultural milieu we are born into. Only a human being can recognize her thrownness: her existence as happening in a certain contingent historical period and place. The thrownness of a paleolite hunter-gatherer and of a today's high-schooler are drastically different.

However, there is something which we, as human beings share. This is our intrinsic freedom, our ability to transcend the facticity and influence the thrownness. At each moment a human being is turned to the future and propels herself toward a future, making decisions by the use of her free will. Here we find the plane of authenticity. This is the recognition of the free will and its total

employment. Authenticity is the ability not to confine oneself to one's thrownness: not to thoughtlessly act in the same way as everyone around you, but to realize your free will and shape yourself according to your own standards.

Authenticity is where morality begins. Of course, one may follow some ethical rules, because they are common in the world one is thrown into, but then no moral choices will ever arise. One can simply follow the flock and stay complacent. However, if we turn to Heidegger's philosophy, we recognize that by acting so one does not realize one's full potential as a human being. Heidegger pronounces no moral judgements, but it is clear that by not realizing one's authenticity one robs herself of a crucial part of Dasein. In a way, she becomes less of a human.

On the contrary, if one realizes her free will, no external circumstances ever can deprive her of it. As Simone de Beauvoir, a philosopher who set out to derive ethical rules from the existentialist ontology, wrote, even great pressure from the others or violence can not deprive people from their free will. You can try and influence one's conscience, but the choice between succumbing to your force or fighting it will always be theirs. Finally, even if they are weakened and can not fight anymore, they can resent you in their thoughts. And there is no way to take this omnipotence of free mind from them. The tortures described in "The Feast of the Goat" serve not to impress the reader and to show, how cruel the Dominican police once was, but to underline the spiritual strength and the undying freedom of the revolutionaries who never said their allies' names.

Now let us return to the quotation. If one is subject to immoral acts, that of course makes one unhappy. However, it does not rob them of the freedom to revolt or silently resent, to peacefully disobey the unjust rules or to conduct an open fight; it does not make one abandon one's moral code and believe that immoral action is permissible. If one finally gives in to the external forces and chooses to accept its tyranny, that is still a personal choice.

On the contrary, if one commits an immoral act (such we have decided to deem the acts which are considered immoral by the person who commits them), one has made a choice to reject their freedom to act as they render good and just and to succumb to some external forces. These forces may be the desire to achieve financial prosperity or a good social standing, the drive to fulfil one's dreams at the cost of others or simply to enjoy oneself in a thoughtless way. The crucial point is that the person who commits such a deed deprives herself of full realization of her free will -- after all, her mind has freely derived a moral principle or intuition, which she now breaks. She now considers her actions dependent upon circumstances, such as the need to prosper. She robs herself from her authentic and free moral life, and confines herself to the facticity and thrownness that guide her behavior. If a cat kills a bird, we do not blame the cat: it has no power over its instincts. If a human kills a bird, recognizing that she should not do so, but succumbing to the force of others' persuasion ("Oh, come on, veganism is stupid, we've always eaten chicken!" or "Hey, Lucy, I bet you can not kill this bird on the branch with a stone, you weakling!") or other external drives, she essentially robs herself of a part of her human existence. She becomes less human.

The life of a person, who has lost all hope in herself and given in to external forces, is senseless. She simply follows the cues of her physiology and her cultural milieu and acts accordingly. According to the ethics of Simone de Beauvoir, she also thus shapes a human being in a way which is not her own, and may influence the other's facticities in a negative way without knowing it. A human being strives for freedom. By robbing ourselves of our freedom, we might make it difficult for the others to achieve freedom too. We give them an example of not realizing one's free will, which becomes a part of their thrownness. In putting oneself in situations, which give one "bad conscience", one also deprives the whole world of the freedom to avoid such trade of one's principles. And this, as freedom and the will for freedom underlines the human existence, is unethical toward others as well as toward yourself.

I believe that the existential ontology does not propose any certain principle of moral conduct, contrary to the ethics of never avoiding freedom that Sartre suggested in "Existentialism is a humanism" or the ethics of maximising everyone's freedom of Simone de Beauvoir in "Ethics of Ambiguity". After all, realizing free will is opposite to always adhering to one universal principle. However, I believe, that without realizing one's freedom no ethical conduct is possible at all. Without it we fall into the patterns imposed on us. Only by acting freely can one act morally or immorally. And the definitions of "moral" and "immoral" can be designed individually as an act of free will. However, for grounds discussed above, I hold the utilitarian ethics for a reasonable and desirable principle.

5. The inavoidability of suffering

In this part of the essay I would like to argue that the need to suffer under "unjust deeds" of others is unavoidable if we are to stay true to own moral principles or intuitions.

Undoubtedly, the world is flawed. There are a lot of things in the facticity and the thrownness of one's existence that one, as a free will, can resent. However, it is usually very difficult to change them. Such are tyrannic regimes, inhumane traditions, a crime taking place in your presence etc. Often something that you resent is an essential part of your own thrownness. After all, we usually do not know too much about the atrocities happening in other epochs and other parts of the world. Here we come to a universally occurring moral dilemma: should one give in to one's thrownness or take a stand against what one considers unjust, thus employing one's free will?

In Hanna Arendt's essay "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil" a man is described, who has chosen to follow the thrownness. That is Adolf Eichmann, a nazi official, whose job was to organize deportation of people to concentration camps and death camps. At the trial on him in Jerusalem, he appeared to be a surprisingly normal person. He definitely followed all the social norms and expectations characteristic of the place and time he lived in. He had a family, which he loved, and he was interested in making a good career. He occupied a pretty decent well-paid position, was obedient to his chiefs, tried to do his job well and did not personally hate the people he sent to die. Probably the only outstanding feature in Eichmann, as Arendt points out, was his thoughtlessness. He did not give his beliefs too much thought, and his last words were a patriotic slogan.

Eichmann is undoubtedly a man, who has completely given in to the facticity and the thrownness of his existence. He loved his family, because that is what one does. He followed the rules, because that is what one does. He worked for the nazi government, because that is what one did at the time. He never gave himself an opportunity to question the views imposed on him or simply contemplated the atrocity of his job, because one did not really have (or admit having) such qualms under the totalitarian nazi regime. And, as Heidegger would say, realizing one's free will is not what one does generally. The tragedy of Eichmann is that by confining himself to the world of "one" (of "man" in Heidegger's terms) he never even gave himself the chance of realizing his authenticity. By being "thoughtless", he never gave himself a chance to transcend the common morality of the nazi party. He never gave himself a chance to be truly human, and thus, to be truly moral.

Undoubtedly, to even give oneself a chance to be moral, one should not allow oneself to turn into "one", one should transcend facticity and thrownness. So, if actions, which you consider immoral, reign in the world, you should take a stand against them. Often that will result in you depriving yourself of happiness or causing suffering to oneself: a truly moral person probably would not have taken Eichmann's well-paid post, she would never gain a fortune by robbing banks, or achieve any other goal at the cost of others. If she holds the principle of utilitarian ethics for just and true, the grounds for which I have shown in the beginning of the essay, she would always have to act

accordingly. However, she would always have to challenge and thoroughly contemplate her views in order not to fall back into throwness of commonplace morals. This is a hard life to live. But this is the only way to be truly human.

To conclude, I would like to return to "The Feast of the Goat". The revolutionaries there rejected the well-being of themselves and of their families in order to secure a happy and peaceful future of their country and to stop the violent crimes of the dictator's regime. They chose to lose their government posts, some of them suffered excruciating pain in jail, some of them had to spend months in hiding. They rejected the facticity of financial prosperity under the tyrant. They resented the throwness into the elite world where people were generally loyal to the ruler. They did what they deemed moral, and that was maximizing the long-term happiness in the republic by assassinating the tyrant. If we view the situation from the existentialist point of view, we see that they realized their authenticity. In view of that support of the others is not needed: the key to truly happy, moral and human existence is staying true to your free will and to your freedom. I believe, Llosa's work is an existential masterpiece: it gives a great example of true Dasein.

In this essay I have analyzed the quote of Plato. Then, I have suggested utilitarianism as an ethical principle, thus supporting the premise that suffering is bad. I have proceeded to use utilitarianism to argue that committing immoral deeds is also undesirable: not only as creation of suffering of others, but also as personal suffering. Then I have turned to Heidegger's and de Beauvoir's existentialist approaches to argue that own immoral action is incommensurably more undesirable than own suffering. I have pointed out that one can only be truly human by acting morally. Finally I have argued that suffering is an unavoidable part of not committing immoral actions. The result might seem rather gloomy: if you want to do good, you will at least sometimes be unhappy. However, as the novel by Llosa shows, an authentic moral being can achieve a much higher form of happiness than an obedient and thoughtless "one" ("man"). Moreover, an authentic human can follow one's moral principles coherently on a large scale, such as a political regime: whatever those thoughtfully designed and regularly challenged principles may be.