UNCONDITIONAL POSSIBILITY AND ABSOLUTE AFFIRMATION
For a theological grammar in support of a rigorous discourse regarding evil

Roberto Ranieri

Investigating the issue

Those who suffer evil say: no–not–this way. Through a spontaneous refusal of reality, the excessive gap between what could possibly have happened and did not occur (healing) is expressed, as well as between what should have happened and did not occur (justice). In terms of language, with regard to evil, reference is made to failure to become. Language, however, in order to exist needs a speaker, and this is where — together with language — a series of aporias begin to emerge.

First of all, it is worth noting that any objection is flawed by ambiguities: those who complain may do so either because of understandable indignation, or due to the presumption which leads us to think that we are the only ones who are able to know how what did not happen could or should have occurred. Secondly, it is worth pointing out that the objection to evil as the assertion of a failure to become does not invoke the completion of the process, but rather the right of being there and remaining before it. If evil appears as the phenomenon which denies the things that exist, which denies the possibility that they may be otherwise and that they might reach their target, those who oppose evil, are opposed to it as a reality which remains by affirming its existence.

Thirdly, the objection to evil is closely associated with the epistemological issue. On the one hand, indeed, thought aspires to the most appropriate language to oppose evil, but is faced with the impossibility of properly stating it before it occurs. On the other hand, after evil has occurred, discussing it is the luxury of those who have been spared: posthumous thought loses its relevance. Evil, therefore, appears as the phenomenic instance which more than any other exposes the possibility of thinking and saying something to a series of logical short–circuits. Based on the considerations made above, a

* Roberto Ranieri, Faculty of Theology of Northern Italy (Milan), robertoranieriofm@gmail.com

rigorous discourse about evil, an appropriate grammar in this respect, could hopefully be pursued by stating the use of modal categories and of the affirmation and denial assertions which are generally used with regard to this issue.

"Impossible possibility" or "impossible reality"?

The discourse regarding evil has to do with becoming. Already Aristotle warned us against the danger of understanding the reality of the self and of the world — and therefore also of evil — in terms of "states of things"; in his opinion what exists is forever because it is in the act of becoming, to the extent that the conditions for becoming must be part of the definition of each entity[1]. Starting from this moment in the history of Western philosophy, becoming has been associated with the dichotomy action/potency. However, in spite of the large number of examples and references to local domains, Jüngel points out that, from the writings of Aristotle to the most recent theories[2], a constant attempt has been made to formalize becoming according to the primacy of act over potency[3]. The tautological definition of power in Aristotle (potency is the possible translation into an act of what potency says it potentially has[4]) is one of the signs of this primacy granted to the act.

The deconstruction by Jüngel is aimed at overturning Aristotle's position, in order to state the primacy of potency over act, irrespective of which — from a theological perspective — a dangerous confusion would arise between gratuity of faith and compensation through deeds. This argument is based on an "ontology of the event of justification" which refers back to St Paul's theology in his epistle to the Galatians. According to the apostle, indeed, the Gospel is faith that comes to humans, and not humans reaching the faith (*Gal*. 3,25). This means, obviously, that faith is a gift, but not the gift through which a Christian acknowledges God, since this would mean that faith is work, more specifically work of knowledge. Therefore, it is not faith which belongs to a Christian, but a Christian who belongs to the faith. The most appropriate figure of speech to interpret the justification event is "transfer of ownership" (*Übereignung*): the Christian is torn away from want-

---

1   This is the definition of δύναμις given in Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, Q, 5, 1048 at 1–2.

2   Remember, in particular, about Bergson's reflection regarding the "act in act" (Bergson, Henry: *L'Évolution créatrice*, Paris: Alcan 1907) and about the consequences of the latter with regard to the phenomenon of evil in Jankélévitch (Jankélévitch, Vladimir: *Le Mal*, Grenoble: Arthand 1947).

3   Jüngel, Eberhard: *Die Welt als Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit. Zum ontologischen Ansatz der Rechtfertigungslehre*, in: *Evangelische Theologie* 29 (1969), Kaiser Verlag, 417–442.

4   Aristotle: *Metaphysics* Q, 3, 1047 at 24–26.

ing to be himself and himself only, so law and sin no longer exert any power over him[5]. The Easter of Jesus, from which the faith event originates, creates a difference between what is justified and what is not, which equals the one between creation and nothingness[6]. The faith event regarded as absolute and unconditional possibility, moreover, prevents us from viewing the difference between God and the world as a distinction between two (possible) worlds[7], divine and human. God, in the gratuitousness of the event, creates a distinction between Himself and the world which equals that between donor and beneficiary of the gift; this distinction, however, is not "a posteriori", but starts from the Easter of Jesus, thus from within the only real world. Before the almighty creative power of endless equally possible worlds one should therefore place the power of resurrection, a paradigm of absolute and unconditional possibility: it calls to existence what could otherwise not exist. The ontology of the justification event, therefore, allows us to regard the world as *creatio ex nihilo*, and as æx Þnastásewj necrÏn. This gain, for theology, should be not so much in the service of ontology, but rather a way of considering God as creator and the creature as justified. The ontological difference between works and faith, in the primacy of faith, corresponds on the side of becoming to the ontological difference between act and potency, in the primacy of possibility. Only this difference makes it possible to understand the subject's being there as a being which is not lost, because fate is always contained in the ever possible evangelical *novum*. On the contrary, wherever act and potency are confused, it is denied that something unconditional could occur. What becomes, in this case, is an internal product of the process, therefore there is no novelty. The justification event, therefore is the formal and material assumption which makes it possible to reorganise a discourse about becoming based on the primacy of possibility over reality, and — therefore — also the discourse regarding evil. Evil is subsequently

5   Jüngel, Eberhard: *"Theologische Wissenschaft und Glaube" im Blick auf die Armut Jesu*, in: *Evangelische Theologie* 24 (1964) 419–443. Jüngel quotes Aristotle mainly from Θ, 1 and 3, while he almost completely ignores L, where a definition is given of the concepts of act and potency which will be discussed later on; moreover he does not seem to attribute any importance to the fact that according to Aristotle the primacy of act over potency is not a value in itself, but rather is functional, by analogy, to clarifying the relationship between matter (ὕλη) and form (εἶδος), supporting the theory that the relationship between act and potency is the same as that between form and matter. The "historical–existential decision of an almost irreversible extent" to which Jüngel refers, therefore in our opinion is more attributable to a metaphysics where act comes before potency, to the analogy to which this metaphysical approach is functional. Hartmann, whom Jüngel incidentally frequently quotes in the aforementioned essay, seems more balanced, when he sees in Aristotle the possibility of going beyond Aristotle's metaphysics itself; see Hartmann, Nicolai: *Teleologisches Denken,* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co. 1950, 66.

6   See ID.: *Die Welt als Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit*, 427.

7   *Ibidem*, 432.

defined by Jüngel as an "impossible reality", in the sense that it is a phenomenon devoid of the possibility of becoming actual in itself. This is essentially a correction of Barth's formula, according to whom the *Nichtige*, the nullifying nothingness arising out of the original denial of evil by God, was defined as an "impossible possibility"[8]. In this expression there remained a problematic actual reference to reality, which is redressed by Jüngel by choosing the perspective of the event of justification, an internal perspective to the world and to history. The *Nichtige* according to Barth, moreover, is difficult to define from a modal perspective: it exists, even though it is neither God nor a creature of His; it is not identifiable with nothingness, or with a non–entity[9]. The fact that God, on the one hand, should reify evil, albeit in a negative way by rejecting it, and that on the other side evil as *Nichtige* should exist in itself, although as an impossible possibility, implies — in terms of thought — renouncing logic, and therefore discourse. In this respect Barth's argument runs the risk of theodicy because it is not (nor does it wish to be) an accomplished mereology, a theory of parts and of the whole. When the *Nichtige* is defined as a product of God's rejection, there is actually a violation of the reflexivity principle, the founding concept of any mereology, according to which any part is first of all part of itself. In Barth's view it is important to state that the *Nichtige* is not part of itself as a part constituted by a rejection: it is set aside and thus becomes part, even though it does not exist according to the way of being of a part. An attempt is made to make the violation of the reflexivity principle acceptable through the extreme case of identity. As a matter of fact Barth nevertheless states that the *Nichtige* is itself, thus creating perplexity as to how it is possible to think that a part exists as such (is, therefore, externally founded) and at the same time exists as itself from itself (is, therefore, self–constructed)[10]. On a more general level compared to that of meeting some requirements in principle, the concept of "part" does not seem sufficiently generic to be applied to any domain. For example in the domain of immaterial objects such as phenomena, the relationship of a part cannot be distinguished from the implication relationship[11]. In other words, this means that the nomination which God uses for

---

8   Barth, Karl: *Gott und das Nichtige*, in: ID., *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. III/3. *Die Lehre von der Schöpfung*, Zürich: EVZ, 1950, 403.

9   *Ibidem*, 405.

10   Barth himself underlines that the *Nichtige* is not in God as if it were a part of him. This, on the one hand, avoids the idea of a demoniac God, as can be seen in Böhme or Schelling; on the other side, however, preventing such a deviation by referring to the extreme case of the identity of the *Nichtige* with itself, seems to create more logical problems than it can actually solve.

11   Simons, Peter: *Parts. A Study in Ontology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1987.

nomination purposes also implies the coming to being of evil as a *necessary* part of nomination itself.

These considerations show that theology, if it wishes to avoid the aberration according to which God, in order to reject evil, would have been forced to generate it, should apply a critical interpretation of modal categories, and can no longer be satisfied with dogmatic formulations which have to be accepted as undisputable. To the extent that modal categories are used to establish the relationships of mutual implication between the assertions of traditional theodicy (God is good, God is almighty, the creation is good), a theory of the ways of parts in relation to the whole, which is clearly also a theory of the ways in which the whole holds together its parts, is unavoidable. It should be acknowledged that Barth, by interpreting the reification of evil as a result of denying God, creates a strong connection between the way of being and language. This moves our reflection towards an analysis of what happens every time God or humans affirm or deny something in respect of evil.

"In the beginning was the yes"

If, according to Barth, evil is the effect of God's no, according to Fuchs God is God as the one who says yes. The follower of Bultmann translates with a captivating phrase the first words of John's Gospel: *in the beginning was the yes*[12]. From the perspective of an ontology of language, saying "yes" by God does not necessarily imply a "no" to what is not said, because it is meant not so much as a verbal expression, but rather as event of the God's way of being in history: God is the one who, by wishing to be in the world and for the world, affirms it positively, and in this affirmation creates it. In other words, God's "yes" is a language event, occurring through and caused by language, and not a linguistic translation of what happens. In this divine "yes" which saturates everything, evil is included as not necessary. The fallout on the anthropological side is significant. A human being, faced with an evil which is possible though not necessary, gains time. He is aware that something bad can always happen, but it is not necessarily *that* evil which has to happen. God takes care of the world by saying "yes" to it, and a human being can do the same. The "yes" which a human being says to the world, as an echo of the divine "yes" takes part in creation, gives life to the world of faith, where there is always the hope of something possible. In this sense it is said that

---

12   Fuchs, Ernst: *Das Christusverständnis bei Paulus und Johannes* (1962), in: ID., *Glaube und Erfahrung. Zum christologischen Problem im Neuen Testament* (Gesammelte Aufsätze III), Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 1965, 309ss.

anything is possible for someone who believes. However, having more time available, not being crushed by the unavoidability of evil, also means having the possibility of critically distinguishing real from real, in other words of discerning, among the transformations of the present time, what is worth being saved, preserved and transferred from what should be abandoned to oblivion. In short: what is good from what is evil. Ernst Fuchs has nonetheless underlined that — in the analysis of each becoming — one should also acknowledge the inevitable passing of time[13]. In this way a time trade–off is established: a human being, because God says "yes" to the world, gains a timespan within which it is possible discern what is evil and what is good; this timespan, though, is in motion, joined to existence and its becoming. For this reason a human being, in order to achieve an essential understanding of existence, to keep the question alive with regard to being there and to the possibility of remaining through becoming, has a finite amount of time, continuously to be regained, which is never given once and for all. Each amount of time gained which allows for self–understanding, is indeed preceded by a time loss, a sense of alienation which detaches from the self because the assessment of all possibilities is first and foremost estranging. This alienation has been acknowledged by early Christianity as Jesus's death on the cross. The disciples acknowledged that the identification of God with the dead body of Jesus appeared as the death of the "yes". History could remain a Holy Saturday without end, however another unconditional possibility — that of the resurrection — started to compete with this possibility, to the extent of causing a willingness not to be removed from the future one had hoped for. Where the delay was really experienced in the second advent which one expected, a distinction was operated between the possibility of hope and the possibility of the unavoidable. In the historical event where this knowledge found its language, there arose the New Testament, the living hope that something unconditionally new may occur at any time[14].

Within the New Testament, the parables are specific rhetorical figures which make the trading with time explicit. Those who listen to the parables are granted the time to deny as necessary an impossible reality and to affirm as possible a possibility with real consequences. As a matter of fact, God's Kingdom, a possible figure of all possibilities, is not announced in abstract terms, but in situations where humans can gain the most from a trade–off with time, starting from where they spend time with what is most familiar to them. At home, for example, where one does not talk in order to be understood, but rather one talks because one is understood. When something evil occurs in this respect, the phenomenon is never expressed as a direct "no" to

13   Fuchs, Ernst: *Hermeneutik*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [4]1970, 158.
14   *Ibidem*, 159.

God, on the contrary it is expressed as a "yes" which starts to compete with the divine "yes", a false affirmation which tries to emancipate itself from the world as creation and pretends to be a creation in itself. A human being who is affected by or guilty of evil renounces the possibility of keeping the question alive as to remaining and condemns him/herself to painfully living in the expectation of an affirmation as an impossible donor. And since this donating cannot achieve the height of the final donation by God, the gesture of offering is repeated until it becomes devoid of meaning. Of course, this negative and caricature–like imitation of the divine creative affirmation — albeit deformed — is a reversed image of it, and still remains a reverberation of the phrase: *in the beginning was the yes*.

Unconditional possibility, absolute affirmation

It has been noted that hermeneutic theology, with regard to our topic, argues a fundamental theory as an assumption: evil does not have an ontological consistency of it its own. In other words, evil thrives as a parasite of others' lives, of the life arising from the *yes* which God says to Himself, to humans, to the world. Its possibility of being depends totally on the reality of being created. This, however, is a dependency which — in order not to appear as such — takes on the most diverse forms. This changing form, however, has nothing to do with God's becoming, or rather it is a mockery thereof, a caricature which perseveres in immobility and hinders all changes. As a matter of fact, evil finds it impossible, starting from itself, to add or subtract anything from what already is; therefore it is doomed to transforming itself through identical repetitions. The reality of evil cannot but continue to change in itself without ever being able to truly become something else. From a theological perspective, only in the light of unconditional possibility, that is to say of the event of grace, is it possible to speculate as to why what appears as evil, is evil. In other words, only against the background of God's *concursus* with history, against the backdrop of the cross, where Jesus's death means putting the word "end" to the cyclicality of time, what appears as evil is actually so, as an opposition to what is new. This is obviously related to the complex epistemological issue regarding the possibility conditions within which it is possible to talk about what is new and, therefore, about what is opposed to it. Indeed, if we are able to formulate forecasting assertions in respect of what still has to happen, we are talking about an occurrence which quite simply "has not happened yet", and not about an unconditional absolute. Does it therefore seem impossible to properly talk about evil? If the relationship between "knowing" and "saying" is interpreted as the primacy of the former over the latter, this question will necessarily have an affirmative answer. The same happens when talking about God by *predicamento sub-*

stantiæ, whereby the proximity between God and humanity is traced back to an ever–increasing distance, and the same is bound to occur with regard to evil. On the contrary, if you admit that language is already the opening of a path to knowledge, if you admit that it is not merely a system of signs subordinated to thought, but rather that it is thought already, also the reference framework for the phenomenon of evil changes radically.

Consider once again what has been indicated here as the original language event: "in the beginning was the yes". As an event, there is no such thing as an idea of God and *then* the image of this idea which says: "yes". On the contrary, God is the one saying "yes", and that is exactly why he is God. He is God because he distinguishes what is possible from what is impossible, or something which is "not yet" possible from an unconditional possibility. Starting from this assumption, there is a criterion which makes it possible to establish, in a manner of saying, the possibility of conditions for what is possible. Jüngel refers to this epistemological principle as "*analogia adventus*"[15]: God's coming into the world allows for a knowledge process which no longer presumes to understand the effects starting from a cause, but considers first of all the disclosing — through the word — of God's gratuitous wanting–to–be–there. God's proximity to humanity, moreover, not only reveals God's being, but reveals human beings to themselves; hence the way in which humans relate to the self and others is the same in which, by analogy, they relate to God. In other words, the human way of being–with–others is analogous to the divine way of being–with–humanity.

Evil can be known as that phenomenon which goes against not so much the relationship between God and humanity, but rather against this "relationship between relationships". The forms of this opposition are variable, as already mentioned, but they all lead to an idea of God in the self, on the one side, and humanity in the self on the other. In this respect, a grammar of becoming which can express in a unified language the absolute affirmation is essential: God's coming into the world *and* humanity's inhabiting the complex of its relations. An ontological reflection about the rules underlying discourse organization is essential in order to tie language to the experience of evil, as well as to its essence. One of these rules should be the "primacy of possibility over reality" (or of potency over act), because only a language which contemplates the unconditional absolute, difference, a novelty which cannot be produced and is unavailable, acknowledges an irreducible space where one can continue to be amazed by narrations of the self, by the world, by God.

Because amazement is the worst enemy of evil.

---

15   Jüngel, Eberhard: *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr ⁸2010, 383ss.

Summary

UNCONDITIONAL POSSIBILITY AND ABSOLUTE AFFIRMATION
For a theological grammar in support of a rigorous discourse regarding evil

The aim of this paper is to question the plausibility of a generic discourse regarding evil, focusing on the need to prepare an appropriate theological grammar for the purpose. The field of research which has been taken into consideration here is the recent theological production of a hermeneutic nature in the protestant area, more specifically: Karl Barth, Ernst Fuchs and Eberhard Jüngel. Reference to these authors will prove that a systematic reflection about the use of modal categories (reality/possibility) and of enunciation assertions (affirmation/denial) is essential in order not to fail grasping an actual phenomenology of evil.

KEYWORDS: evil, hermeneutics, possibility, affirmation, denial, temporality.