Interview with Dr Mikołaj Sławkowski-Rode,
Institute of Philosophy, University of Warsaw,
Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford

ČEMU: Europe is shaken. Socio-political circumstances have changed drastically and have influenced the EU paradigms. The system is upset, the extreme right is getting stronger across the countries, people feel insecure and lose trust in the open system. Humanism and democracy as the base of the Western civilisation stumble over their own limits. What we believed in until recently, and what we would still like to believe, becomes a bump in the road in the new circumstances. Which is why I would love to talk with you about those points of conflict today, about the circumstances in which we are forced to choose between the principles, or ideals, and practicality and perhaps devastating facts.

I believe that for this reason, it is also very important to try to understand one other big catastrophe of human history – World War 2.

The first question to ask should maybe be the question of the value of an apology. When we talk about WW2, the first thing we think about is unfortunately the genocide. After the war a lot of attention was given to the apology. The Europe was shocked by its own blindness and the fact that not only that they didn't prevent the genocide, they didn't even notice it until it was too late. That made the apology extremely important, especially in the time directly after the end of the war. It didn't change the facts and the horrifying events, but at least it gave a symbolic promise that something similar would not happen again.

But the apology is still talked about, even after all this time. What is the meaning of the apology today? Can the Germans of today apologize to the Jews of today, for something their ancestors did long time ago? More importantly, can they even be expected to apologise? What is the point of repeated apologising for something that is a history already old at least a few generations?

Sławkowski: To apologize is to seek forgiveness. Forgiveness can only be given by the victim, and only to his wrongdoer. No one

can forgive, or be forgiven on someone else's behalf. An apology is the result the wrongdoer's recognition and acceptance of their guilt, and their need for the victim to deny it. That's one difficulty: for an apology to serve its purpose the reality of guilt needs to be simultaneously affirmed and denied. Another difficulty with apologies arises of course when the victim is no longer there to give forgiveness, or the perpetrator to ask for it. A special case of this difficulty is when, as with the Second World War, the groups of victims and perpetrators are difficult to clearly define and even distinguish. There is a constantly growing tendency to see that period in deeply oversimplified terms, as a struggle of goodies against the baddies – reminiscent of the black-and-white portrayals of cowboys and Indians in golden age Westerns. The complexity of the reality in this regard is so great it might be the case we cannot get very far beyond it in our assessment of the period as a whole. Yet this tendency to oversimplify stems precisely from the need to have a clear assessment of one of the darkest moments in human history, to be able to identify the perpetrators, and in doing so contain the guilt, so immense no human conscience seems completely free of it. I mean this in the sense of the extension of the well documented phenomenon of survivor's guilt onto all those living after the War: analogous to the question "who am I, the person who survived?" we can ask "who am I, the person living after this?" The seeking of those who are to blame, the demanding of apologies is really the seeking of forgiveness, the need for it is so great we want to give it instead of the victim, but no real forgiveness can come from a made up victim after an apology from a made up villain, particularly when the crime is real.

This is a vast and vastly important issue. In this context a good example of a philosophical treatment of the problem of guilt is Karl Jaspers' work The Question of German Guilt. The other side of the problem, that of forgiveness, is famously dealt with by Vladimir Jankelevitch in his book simply entitled Forgiveness. Both authors are sceptical of the possibility of forgiveness in the face of the reality of guilt – and so of its possibility as such. Guilt can only be remembered and not forgiven, the argument goes, as to forgive would be

to deny reality to the offence, and so not really to forgive at all, but rather to forget. This might not be true in all cases, but there seems to a deep intuition there with regard to the most grave of offences, and particularly those which involve not just individuals but whole populations. I'm very suspicious when it comes to public apologies for past crimes, as usually all they point to is that the perpetrators are long dead, and therefore encourage to forget (unless of course their motives are completely ulterior, in which case remembering was never the objective anyway).

ČEMU: What about denials of genocide? How do they emerge, and why?

Sławkowski: There seem to me to be many reasons. Some political, with little actual connection to the events themselves, others rooted in the incomprehensible character of these events. The latter group is chillingly anticipated by the perpetrators themselves – both Hitler and Stalin were well aware that if their crimes reach fantastical proportions they will be treated by many as fantasy. Another aspect of this incomprehensibility is the limits our imagination has in its ability to reconstruct the subjective experience of the death camp inmate. This is something that returns in many accounts of the holocaust – the disbelief, and lack of trust in their own memory of the prisoners themselves. For that reason many have said that nothing really survives the camps – not even memory. Their truth remains with those Primo Levi called 'the drowned'. How then are we to affirm something we can't understand? We can either stick to the facts, as Ivan Karamazov, or resign ourselves to judgement as Alyosha, and accept that everyone is responsible for everything – which is no more comprehensible that the facts.

ČEMU: But unfortunately, genocide did happen, and not only one. From the philosophical point of view, what could be a good way of preventing the future possible genocide?

Sławkowski: I don't think philosophy (or in fact any academic discipline) is the right place to look for a solution to the world's pro-

blems. People and their actions, sometimes very heroic, are. Perhaps if philosophy contributes to the moral development of humanity then it has some indirect bearing on whether there will be mass killings in the future, but the link isn't certain, and even if we were to assume it the influence would have to be very slow indeed, judging by how things are going so far!

ČEMU: But why did WW2 even happen? I don't mean historically, but from the social and philosophical points of view. What could lead to WW3? Are we, as philosophers, doing enough to prevent it? Is there hope in political philosophy?

Sławkowski: There is no easy way to answer these questions. Apart perhaps from the last two: again it seems to me that there is very little philosophers can do in that department, and particularly if they're doing political philosophy. The Second World War can be described as the epiphany of the Devil. He shows up here and there in acts of selfless evil, or as Kant would say 'wicked will', but during the War he came out hoof and horn and acted through whole nations. What could lead to another such epiphany? Certainly, as many have said, the Devil's greatest trick is to make man believe he doesn't exist. Each time he shows up it has a sobering effect, but the naïve belief that there is no such thing as wicked will can speed up his return on a great scale. The trust in a rationalizable self-interest which grounds all human actions in an 'ends and means' basis, the tendency to oversimplify things in terms of moral culpability, the reliance on such platitudes as the power of love, or the value of human life, all leave us vulnerable. However even if philosophy helps us to understand these things it is no safeguard, just as a printer manual does not guarantee the printer will work.

ČEMU: Speaking of philosophers, what do you think is the role of Hannah Arendt in understanding and dealing with the aftermath of WW2?

Sławkowski: Arendt contributed a lot to the way we think about the Second World War, totalitarianism, and human nature. Amongst her

most important insights is the idea that the evil of a totalitarian system is something we cannot comprehend, as it goes beyond what is humanly conceivable – in the totalitarian utopia all that is human is already gone she says. Conversely, the evil deeds of an individual may seem inconceivable, but that's because there may be nothing astonishing to comprehend about them – this is Arendt's famous thesis about the banality of evil. Even the worst of crimes might be wholly unexceptional in their motivation. With Eichmann's case this was stupidity and careerism, rather than fanatic adherence to the Nazi ideology. The disappearance of reasons and rationality in mechanisms of totalitarian systems of course encourages in individuals the pursuit of the most trivial motivations. The two go hand in hand.

ČEMU: You've mentioned Eichmann. He certainly is a specific figure, especially concerning psychology in WW2. Could another Eichmann happen in the world today?

Sławkowski: I'm sure there are plenty of Eichmanns out there, though thankfully not in charge of transports to gas chambers. Eichmann's banality meant that his actions did not have murderous and evil intentions in the normal sense – he seemed to lack the understanding of his relation to others and the meaning of his decisions – the fact that whole systems, totalitarian systems, can be run by people who lack reflexivity so deeply is not banal at all, in fact it verges on the incomprehensible. If the Devil returns to Europe in a similar way as in the 30's and 40's he will primarily inspire the hearts of Eichmanns. But similar attitudes emerge in more trivial situations, like in the astonishing news of people being trampled to death in a stampede to a pile of reduced VCR's.

ČEMU: Some believe that culture and art are the final saviours of humanity. How important was art after the war? Why is the art of Holocaust important today?

Sławkowski: The War has damaged art as badly as it has damaged everything else. If it can regain its former position then perhaps the-

re is a chance of a spiritual restoration more generally. Perhaps we are observing this process already, with artists becoming confident again that there is something positive and significant they're able to convey, and point us to a realm of meaning outside of our own, where our quest for justification might be fulfilled. After the War this dimension seamed forever closed, a sentiment succinctly expressed by Adorno announcing the death of poetry, and instead focused on showing how things really are, particularly in all their ugliness and squalor. That's not quite the how it was: the spiritual decomposition which undermined art also allowed the chaos and atrocities of the War, but the War hastened the process. The art of the Holocaust is problematic, it's difficult to find meaning in that place. The importance of art is here the same as always: it is a search for justification. If there can't be any for the Holocaust, then we as human beings require it all the more.

ČEMU: Can we connect the Holocaust to other documents of national aggression in history (for example the Armenian Genocide)? Should we try to connect and understand them together?

Sławkowski: Tolstoy famously begins Anna Karenina by saying that "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I think that the histories of nations are, in some respects at least, like the histories of families. There are aspects of the meaning of American history, which have significance for life in America that has to elude a European living in Europe. Equally the tragic fate of European Jews is something the significance of which is difficult to fully realize even for other Europeans. The relevant dissimilarities are what matters most here, and so a comparative perspective, which needs to generalize over these dissimilarities, is likely to miss what is most relevant. This relevance however, as I said, is difficult enough to grasp. Perhaps seeing the Holocaust in the context of other phenomena which seem similar is a necessary starting point now that more than two generations separate us from these events.

ČEMU: Another important thing that should not be neglected when we talk about the Holocaust, and genocides in general, is the role of

dehumanization? How do you see the role of it in creating the background for such horrendous acts?

Sławkowski: 'Dehumanization' can be understood in several ways. When Ortega Y Gasset writes about the dehumanization of art he means roughly that art has lost interest in human concerns. He sees this as a positive thing, a liberation from a burden, which made art tendentious and kitsch. The dehumanized art aims solely for the perfection of form. By analogy we can call 'dehumanization' the process of other forms of human activity losing interest in human concerns. It is obvious that totalitarian systems were characteristically blind in that respect, and together with human concerns they swiftly did away with human beings themselves. Currently in the West we might perhaps speak of another form of dehumanization which comes in the guise of naturalism. It is most visible in scientific theorising about humanity, but precipitates into economy, law, and even medicine.

ČEMU: Today there is a lot of talk about human rights, what are they, where do they come from, where do they stop. What do you think about the issue of human rights today?

Sławkowski: I might be the wrong person to comment on the importance of human rights, as I am rather sceptical with regard to the notion. In many of its current forms the idea of human rights seems to me to be deeply confused, although often expressing noble sentiments. Rights are inseparable from responsibilities – if I have a right to something someone else needs to have the responsibility of providing that thing. Otherwise my so called right is meaningless. In the context of the universal human rights there is no clear responsibility attached… is it the government's responsibility to secure my right to education for example, and if so which government? Maybe if it's a universal right it ought to be everyone's responsibility? But, as with all things, if something is everyone's responsibility it's as good as no one's. What about the right to marry? Who has the responsibility to secure this right, and are they to do it if no one wants to marry me? I often feel when

listening to discussions of this issue that human rights mainly serve the purpose of easing the conscience of those who believe in them – 'clearly, if I uphold human rights, since they're universal, that's enough for me to feel I'm playing my part in fulfilling them'. But the responsibility is absent. This contributes to what many have called the 'inflation of rights', where the currency has become cheap; just how cheap can be seen from the fact that Saudi Arabia, China and Vietnam have all been appointed to the United Nations Council on Human Rights. All three countries forbid free speech, they don't respect religious freedom or freedom of conscience, and neither of them has a transparent system of law.

ČEMU: Did we maybe go too far with the human "rights", to the point of the whole movement becoming potentially dangerous, and the so called "positive" discrimination becoming even more negative to the other groups?

Sławkowski: I'm equally sceptical of 'positive discrimination'. However you call it discrimination will remain discrimination. Discriminating might be justifiable in some cases – we discriminate for example when we marry, or decide to pay for our children's education – but when discrimination is being camouflaged as something else that's a cause for worry.

ČEMU: What is then your opinion on the new phenomenon of real vs. false caring, the emergence of fake humanists who are using social issues for self-promotion and other narcissistic reasons?

Sławkowski: This phenomenon is sometimes called 'virtue signalling'. It is another segment of the interpersonal market which is suffering inflation – the inflation of values. Virtue signalling is cheap, it doesn't require any sacrifice. On the contrary it is a reward in itself. In the long term I think it can be very destructive to how people are able to relate to each other and the world – faced with real difficulties, obviously, it is of little use to brandish one's own vision of one's moral standing.

ČEMU: Thinking more of caring, and back to history – we care about the history, WW2 is well talked about and we promised it will never happen again – yet Hiroshima and Nagasaki happened?

Sławkowski: The attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the last major event of the Second World War, and amongst the most horrifying. Past atrocities have rarely stopped people from more destruction – how can they if the sole fact of planning them hasn't?

ČEMU: Still, let's hope that there's still place for optimism. Maybe our hope is exactly in the fact that the horrors of history are not forgotten, and we still talk about them, even though we are generations away. Thank you for the conversation, and hopefully the future that awaits us holds more communication, and less tragedy.