

“The Power of the One Needs the Stupidity of the Other.”¹ Bonhoeffer’s Theory of Stupidity and Analysis of its Socio-political Impact

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Abstract: *Stupidity is a greater evil than evil itself. This could be the synthesis of the theory put forward by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Protestant pastor, theologian, counter-intelligence officer, and martyr, whose work decisively influenced the subsequent evolution of the relationship between society and theology. One of the most fascinating aspects of his thinking is represented by the theorization of stupidity, which appears in his meditation “After Ten Years,” where he outlines the disastrous consequences of human stupidity, as well as how stupidity – as a form of legitimizing evil – can be stopped. The greatest evil that society must confront is imbecility. But what is its connection to political (or radical) evil, and how can we stop its disastrous consequences?*

Keywords: *Bonhoeffer, Theory of Stupidity, Political Evil, Radical Evil, Socio-political Implications, Legitimization, Liberation Education, the Legitimization of Power*

Preliminary

We live in a world increasingly burdened by suffering. The suffering, rooted in a generalized state of crisis, is largely attributable to the low level of flexibility inherent in social constructs. It is not surprising, in this regard, to observe, upon a superficial glance, that political decision-makers enact measures that are contradictory and antagonistic to their own beliefs. The issue does not lie in a lack of ideological principles but in the docility of citizens who, in the face of increasing depersonalization, are capable of legitimizing decisions beyond their comprehension, causing irreversible harm. The existence of such a low level of understanding of their own dignity leads to the legitimization of actions that are illegitimate. In such a society lived Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Protestant pastor,

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Grunchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 43.

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theologian, intelligence officer, and martyr. He reflected on the deficiency that society encounters in its development and termed this lack, which leads to unimaginable social evil, as *stupidity*. Bonhoeffer's theory of stupidity, beyond being a purely theological reflection, has extraordinary sociological implications. How can a political regime that produces so much harm exist, and how can respectable citizens agree to such actions? The myriad of answers coalesces, in the work of the great theologian, into a single word: *stupidity*.

Stupidity does not refer, in his thinking, to mental disorder, but to a sociological problem. The stupid person is much more dangerous than the evil one, not because their actions are inherently evil, but because, through their stupidity, they create an abnormal society, devoid of values and principles, and equally because, in the face of stupidity, there is no defense, no way to retaliate. A major flaw of stupid people, which affects the entire community, is that they are easily manipulated, they are docile towards a tyrannical political power, towards a dictator who legitimizes their own power through the stupidity of the citizens. Certainly, Bonhoeffer was writing in a period when Germany was under the terrible Nazi leadership, but what fascinates the pastor is the docility of people in the face of absurd leadership. Faced with such a problem, the stupidity of a *world's coming of age* can be resolved through both inner and outer liberation.

Throughout this work, we will try to find out how society is affected by stupidity, giving an answer, through Bonhoeffer's words, to the question that will constitute the hypothesis of the entire work: *Why is stupidity the greatest social (political) evil?* We will try to find out who Dietrich Bonhoeffer was and why the theory of stupidity is still so valid today.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: the pastor who reads *the signs of the times*

There have been many words spoken and written about Dietrich Bonhoeffer,² and perhaps just as many could be said about an incredible life: "ambiguities in his life and thought which have fascinated and

² It is rather difficult to provide an exhaustive bibliography of the writings on the life, activity, and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but among the most important we mention Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010); Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Dorothy M. Emmet (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968); Edwin H. Robertson, *The Shame and the*

stimulated both his immediate contemporaries and a whole new generation which never met him.”³ Presenting Bonhoeffer’s life, I will not dwell so much on biographical details, but rather on how Bonhoeffer understood the society in which he lived, to help us understand how he shaped his theory about stupidity and its connection to political evil.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau, and six years later he moved to Berlin. After a period of study in Tübingen, Rome, and then Berlin, he was ordained in 1931 and appointed chaplain to students at the Technical University of Berlin. After Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, he went to England to pastor two German communities in London. In 1935, he returned to Germany. Upon his return to his homeland, he was asked to organize a seminary, which, after two years, would be closed. From that moment on, Bonhoeffer would not have a stable home.⁴ In 1939, he traveled to the USA, but did not stay for long. Upon his return to Germany, he joined a group of people conspiring to assassinate Hitler. In 1941, to avoid conscription into the army and to provide cover for the Confessing Church movement, he joined, as a secret informant, the German Military Intelligence Bureau. In 1943, he was arrested on suspicion of helping Jews escape from Germany. After a failed assassination attempt on Hitler on July 20, 1944, clear evidence emerged indicating Bonhoeffer’s involvement in collaborating with the conspirators. He was then transferred from Tegel prison in Berlin to the concentration camp in Buchenwald, and later to the horrific camp in Flossenbürg, where he was hanged on April 9, 1945. Less than a month later, Germany surrendered.⁵

It is crucial to unravel the context in which the meditation “After Ten Years” was written in order to understand Bonhoeffer’s premises, as well as to frame, in a broader context, what would later be called the theory of stupidity. “After Ten Years” fits into the general context of the Protestant

Sacrifice: The Life and Preaching of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987).

³ Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald G. Smith, *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences of his Friends* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 13; John W. de Gruchy, “Biographies and Portraits,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, eds. Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 462.

⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 594.

⁵ For a synthesis of Bonhoeffer’s biography and doctrine as applied to the contemporary world see John P. Burgess, Jerry Andrews and Joseph D. Small, *A Pastoral Rule for Today: Reviving an Ancient Practice* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 144–62.

pastor's faith and his thinking, which sought to find an answer (or rather to offer one) regarding the behavior of the church in the contemporary world and, especially, its challenges. Bonhoeffer was only thirty-six years old when he wrote this essay, and on April 5, 1943, he was arrested (less than four months after writing the essay). In it, the Christian theologian meditates on the world he sees crumbling before his eyes, and on how evil has become inherent in the world. The voice in "After Ten Years" is not the voice of a hero, but the voice of one dismayed by the moral decline of society. Therefore, Bonhoeffer not only calls for involvement for us, our social group, or the political ideology we support, but also for history itself.

In whatever particular historical moment we find ourselves, we are summoned to determine what our place in history will be, to think and act beyond our self-interest for the sake of a common good: not just the common good of the moment, our particular political group, or even our society, but of our times – to act, as Bonhoeffer put it, on behalf of history itself and for the sake of future generations and the kind of society we would wish for them.⁶

The succinctly presented biographical data of Dietrich Bonhoeffer not only help us contextualize his work and thought but also understand that he was a pastor familiar with the world (the worldly pastor). He knew the challenges and needs of the world in which he lived, and in this understanding, he was able to meditate on the major questions of his society. Even though his freedom was restricted, no one could steal his freedom of spirit and depth of thought. Bonhoeffer, in the world in which he lived, represented a point of reference for theological and sociological development, and the relevance of his ideas persists in the world we live in.

What is stupidity?

The ambiguity of the term *stupidity* is what greatly complicates its definition. It is not easy to precisely determine what stupidity refers to or what its main characteristics are precisely because the definition of stupidity does not enjoy much objectivity. However, if we were to refer to stupidity according to the definition provided by the Oxford Dictionary, we would say that: stupidity is "the state, quality, or fact of being stupid or foolish;

⁶ For understanding the entire socio-political context of the emergence of the essay "After Ten Years", we refer to the entire introduction in Barnett, *"After Ten Years": Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Our Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 16.

lack or absence of intelligence, perceptiveness, or common sense". Thus, we observe that stupidity is defined as the lack or absence of intelligence, perceptiveness, or common sense. It is therefore a deficiency; not so much a personal defect, but this deficiency can become a social defect. And it is precisely this viewpoint that belongs to Bonhoeffer. The pastor speaks more about the consequences of stupidity rather than its causes or meanings, but even so, from Bonhoeffer's examples, we can understand some defining aspects of stupidity.

First and foremost, this is not a personal defect or pathology. Personally, I consider this to be the most relevant defining point offered by Bonhoeffer's perspective because stupidity does not affect the person it possesses. Stupidity is neither a disease nor a disorder acquired through biological or psychological defects, but rather *an absence* that does not cause pain. Stupidity does not cause unrest in the heart of the one who is stupid, it does not affect one's natural material or physical construction, it is not visible from a distance, and it does not allow for contradictory interpretations. Imbecility is stupid and that's it. It is quite simple to realize who is stupid and who is not, but it is terribly difficult to fight against it. However, stupidity is the defect of those who allow themselves to be affected by it. This is precisely the pivot of Bonhoeffer's theory: "The impression one gains is not so much that stupidity is a congenital defect but that, under certain circumstances, people are *made* stupid or that they allow this to happen to them."⁷ People are made stupid or allow it to happen to them. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the defect of stupidity is not congenital but *induced*. People, in their simplicity, accept being stupid. The reason is not offered by the Christian pastor, but we can intuit it: because it is simpler. Stupidity is simpler, easier to bear, than the *burden of truly being free* through education and by compensating for the lack of intelligence through the accumulation of information.

Bonhoeffer doesn't hesitate to speak openly about this absence, which he sees as *a problem of the group*. Individual people are not as stupid as those who gather and form a collective. This point of the theologian's observation may seem contradictory in relation to his own work. "Life Together" represents one of the pastor's fundamental books dedicated to the benefits and importance of life lived in communion with those of the same faith and ideals, scattered like seeds just to spread the message of

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 43.

Christianity's saving grace.⁸ However, when he says, "we note further that people who have isolated themselves from others or who live in solitude manifest this defect less frequently than individuals or groups of people inclined or condemned to sociability,"⁹ he is not referring so much to the community he envisioned with "Life Together," but rather highlights unity based on the absence of ethical principles. Bonhoeffer's community is one that remains united by faith; stupidity does not unite but only gathers. The difference is significant. As common beliefs bring us together and direct us towards a common goal, stupidity only gathers us in a similar dimension of narrow spaces, which does not evolve but, on the contrary, stagnates, lacking purpose and meaning. Stupidity does not lead because it has nowhere to go. Therefore, from another point of view, stupidity is a social defect, not congenital.¹⁰ Being a defect of society, it is assumed that society has the necessary tools to find solutions to this problem, but the solutions are the aim of a later part of this work. *Together*, for Bonhoeffer, does not necessarily imply a physical connection, but rather an ideological one. The image of scattered seeds is fundamental to the pastor's thinking. The defect of stupidity is manifested in physical interaction, whereas in solitude, it manifests itself less frequently. In this regard, there are studies¹¹ that demonstrate the fact that the majority opinion can exert an influence on the minority, an influence that can even lead to making decisions against their own convictions or beliefs. This power of influence of the majority, and even more so of stupidity, further proves Bonhoeffer's supposition that stupidity is a social defect.

Equally, stupidity serves as a *form of legitimization of power*; however, before delving into the development of this crucial point in Bonhoeffer's thinking on stupidity, we must first clarify some socio-political aspects related to legitimacy and power. Legitimization, it is worth mentioning marginally, refers to the accreditation of a certain type of behavior, the seeking of broad approval of a form of action that may have various

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together/Prayerbook of the Bible*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesh and James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 28.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 43.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 43.

¹¹ Solomon E. Asch, "Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments," in *Groups, Leadership and Men; Research in Human Relations*, ed. Harold Guetzkow (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Press, 1951), 177–90.

purposes, including obtaining or maintaining power.¹² Legitimization is necessary for any form of governance, whether despotic or democratic. Without it, power essentially lacks the necessary levers of action or influence. It has been rightly assumed that legitimization represents the primary goal of political discourse,¹³ as through broad legitimization, political actors manage to justify their political agenda and thus maintain or redirect the destiny of a nation or an entire region.¹⁴ Additionally, power is often understood as an asymmetric control relationship over valuable resources in the established relations within society.¹⁵ Therefore, power, in the terms this study seeks to elucidate, is understood only within a society and thus is a social power,¹⁶ which aims to achieve various goals across different levels of society. Therefore, it is quite clear that those who hold power also have a broad mastery over information and control its flow, thereby having the ability to manage the impressions others have of them, controlling their own legitimization. In this regard, maintaining power is associated with the dependence on stereotypes that contribute to the stagnation of the powerless in their place.¹⁷ With the help of these few clarifications regarding the necessity of power for legitimization, we can more easily understand the definition of stupidity as the legitimization of power that Bonhoeffer expresses in terms such as: “The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other.”¹⁸ This perspective is what will later shape the entire theory of stupidity formulated by the Protestant pastor. Only by understanding imbecility as a form of legitimizing political, and thus social, power can we understand the harmful consequences of it. Stupid people, gathered and suffering from a profound social defect, act in accordance with the desires of the powerful, and moreover, they

¹² Antonio Reyes, “Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions”, *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (November 2011): 782.

¹³ Piotr Cap, “Towards the Proximization model of the Analysis of Legitimization in Political Discourse,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 40, no. 1 (January 2008): 39.

¹⁴ Reyes, “Strategies of Legitimization”, 783.

¹⁵ Jojanneke van der Toorn and Matthew Feinberg, “A Sense of Powerlessness Fosters System Justification: Implications for the Legitimization of Authority, Hierarchy, and Government,” *Political Psychology* 20, no. 20 (2014): 2.

¹⁶ Susan T. Fiske and Jennifer Berdahl, “Social Power,” in *Social Psychology: A Handbook of Basic Principles*, eds. Arie W. Kruglanski and Edward T. Higgins (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 680.

¹⁷ van der Toorn and Feinberg, “A Sense of Powerlessness,” 2.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 43.

are tools in the hands of the powerful: “having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil.”¹⁹ Power can decide not only the course of the nation but also the minds of those who submit with much imbecility. Political power, especially that concentrated in the hands of a despot/dictator, requires the stupidity of others. As we have observed, the context in which Bonhoeffer writes is marked by a totalitarian regime, and this fact determines his meditation on stupidity. To remain in power, the manifested power without any logic, which causes much harm and which, in a normal society, could not be tolerated, greatly needs as much stupidity as possible. We can assert, without error, that dictatorial power is directly proportional to the level of stupidity. The greater the stupidity, the more brutal the regime will be, and its actions will be more abominable! Bonhoeffer does not limit himself to specifying the deficient relationship of legitimization between stupidity and power but also provides additional explanations to assure us that this relationship is not based on academic preparation or lack of information, but: “upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity.”²⁰ Thus, the rise of power in the public or religious sphere infects people with stupidity, and this relationship is a socio psychological law in terms provided by Bonhoeffer. It is not academic preparation or lack thereof that determines stupidity but simply the impact that the increase in power capital, surprisingly, has on people that determines the degree of stupidity. The socio psychological law that Bonhoeffer speaks of structurally refers to the persuasion exerted by the rise of power over citizens. Without claiming exhaustiveness, however, it must be said that persuasion techniques, following various application models, lead to a unitary goal, changing attitudes in favor of a specific purpose.²¹ The problem of changing citizens’ attitudes and, in fact, legitimizing power through stupidity, arises when the political agenda presupposes actions that have a negative impact on society but are accepted through citizens’ stupidity.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 43.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Gregory R. Maio and Geoffrey Haddock, “Attitude Change,” in *Social Psychology: A Handbook*, eds. Kruglanski and Higgins, 579.

Thus, we come to the central point of Bonhoeffer's theory of stupidity. If until now the definition of stupidity has focused on the consequences presented by the Protestant pastor, however, he offers a direct definition that constitutes the climax of his theory: "Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice."²² Stupidity is even more dangerous than evil and harder to combat. Evil, in Bonhoeffer's thinking, carries within itself the germ of subversion that produces discomfort in those who recognize it. More clearly, evil is more easily perceptible. The malicious person can be stopped because evil is exposed and thus halted, whereas in the face of stupidity, we are deprived of conventional defense. The stupid person is not aware of their own stupidity; in fact, they are self-satisfied. Arguments of reason and logic *fall on deaf ears* and produce no effect. Stupidity cannot be stopped from the harmful evil it produces; therefore, in the theologian's thinking, this is one of the most harmful states possible. This point of view, which also begins the pastor's meditation on stupidity, opens a wide horizon and, equally, a question as provocative as it is fundamental: If stupidity affects society in such a serious form, can we say that stupidity is a political evil?

Stupidity and political evil

We have seen that stupidity, in Bonhoeffer's thinking, can be defined as a sociological problem, a group deficiency that does not fall within the psychological or cognitive spectrum and through which power is legitimized, thus becoming one of the greatest *social evils*. In this sense, we cannot help but wonder if perhaps stupidity, in the form theorized by the Protestant theologian, is not a political evil, or at least if it is not a manifestation of this nefarious form of evil.

In approaching this perspective, we will attempt to define what political evil is and what its forms are, and then we will try to provide an answer regarding the compatibility between totalitarian evil and stupidity.

Evil takes on many distinct forms, many ways in which it manifests and brings calamity and disaster closer to us, but one of the most dire forms of evil, if we were to categorize evil and its manifestations, would undoubtedly be political evil. While personal evil affects only the soul of the individual who perpetrates it, political evil affects an entire nation, group, or society gratuitously, merely to achieve goals deemed

²² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 43.

reasonable or considered reasonable by political leaders. This form is not a classical definition, and it is even more difficult to offer a standard definition of political evil. Some authors identify political evil with the violation of human rights, but such a similarity is too general and unspecific. Political evil could be defined as “the intentional, malevolent, and gratuitous destruction, suffering, or death inflicted upon innocent people by political leaders and states in their strategic efforts to achieve attainable objectives.”²³

Within the definition of political evil, we distinguish three fundamental aspects. Firstly, political evil is perpetrated by a political leader or by a state. It is thus a state policy, a regime, or a law. Political evil is not an act, an action, but a way of acting. The terminology of *politics* may be incomplete, but it conceals some important implications. Only a leader who holds political power can commit political evil by imposing it as state policy through his actions. Perhaps the most well-known example in this case is undoubtedly Hitler’s infamous extermination program. However, unfortunately, this is not the only example that can be offered as an illustration of what political evil entails. In addition to this aspect, political evil implies that it is exercised upon *innocent* people. It is certain that innocence can have many meanings and definitions; nevertheless, in the case of political evil, the innocence of the people upon whom it is exercised implies that they have not committed any act that would normally violate the state’s law and thus make them liable to civil or criminal punishment. Thus, we observe that political evil is also discriminatory. Because in the absence of clearly expressed conditions on how it is committed, the group of people is thus at the mercy of the head of the state who, at his discretion, can decide who lives/suffers or not. Lastly, the third characteristic to consider when discussing political evil is that of *strategic effort*. A strategic effort presupposes, above all, a plan that leads to the achievable objective pursued by political evil. Thus, political evil, unlike other types of evil, is organized evil, which follows a plan toward a very precise goal, but which most often is petty, personal, and does not aim for the common good, as any policy should that seeks to offer a benevolent space for citizens.

²³ Alan Wolfe, *Political Evil. What It Is and How to Combat It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 11.

Not every evil manifested in the world is political evil.²⁴ Essentially, political evil represents that form of evil that aims to achieve a political goal or has a direct connection to the realization of a political aspiration, whether national or international. Specialists identify four types of political evil, which then branch out into subcategories: *terrorism*, *ethnic cleansing*, *racially, ethnically, or religiously motivated killings*, and finally, *counter-evil*, which involves inflicting unjustified suffering on those presumed to have inflicted suffering upon oneself.²⁵

Stupidity and radical evil

We thus observe that stupidity does not appear in the list of manifestations of political evil, although, as argued earlier, in Bonhoeffer's thinking, it represents one of the greatest evils. However, it must be clarified that the list of actions through which political evil manifests is not (and I firmly believe cannot be) exhaustive. Political evil can be encountered in any form that limits, obstructs, or eliminates citizens' rights and freedoms, any form that has a negative impact on society. The only necessary condition for it to be understood as political evil is that it is exercised by a leader who holds political power. Such a view, which touches upon the *banalities of evil*,²⁶ belongs to Hannah Arendt, a great theorist of totalitarianism, as well as of the political phenomenon and its implications. For Arendt, political evil does not stop at the four forms listed but has a broader spread, a more comprehensive definitional breadth. It is interesting to note that both the context of Bonhoeffer and that of Arendt are similar; both are affected by the nefarious actions of the Nazi regime, and consequently, their views, although different, share sufficiently important commonalities.²⁷ It is not the purpose of the present study to compile a

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 36.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 29–35.

²⁶ The concept of the *banality of evil* appears in the book Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964). According to Arendt's testimony, this concept is not intended to theorize on the nature of evil, but simply to note the facts that occurred during Eichmann's trial; it is thus a strictly factual view. Arendt is amazed by the fact that Eichmann does not have a diabolical character or a pathological psychology, but simply his flaw is thoughtlessness. The evil committed by Eichmann is banal, not because the evil was commonplace (the deeds were atrocious), but because the perpetrator was so ordinary, hence, banal.

²⁷ To see such a comparison: Charles T. Mathewes, "A Tale of Two Judgments: Bonhoeffer and Arendt on Evil, Understanding, and Limits, and the Limits of Understanding Evil," *The Journal of Religion* 80, No. 3 (Jul. 2000): 375–404; James Bernauer, "Bonhoeffer

list of these points, but rather to consider what evil means and, particularly, the consequences of stupidity.

The recipe for radical evil

For Arendt, the unprecedented atrocities committed by the Nazi regime are called *radical evil*,²⁸ with three stages to fulfill to truly be called radical or absolute. Before listing the three points of radical evil, it is important to mention that the term *radical*, synonymous with absolute, is based on Arendt's conception that this evil is so great because it is not based on any rational motive. It brings no benefit to society, the economy, or military power, and that is precisely why it is an absolute evil and, equally, the crimes it was capable of, which history had never encountered, made this new type of evil - *radical evil* - unable to be compared to anything prior. Its only foundation, in Arendt's thinking, is the totalitarian belief that anything is possible, but which demonstrates that everything can be destroyed. This belief, which created absolute evil, has turned humanity into something superfluous, without value and meaning,²⁹ Thus, the first step towards achieving absolute evil or, in Arendt's words, towards *absolute domination* is the *killing of legal personality*, that is, the removal of a person from the protection of the law and, equally, from the scope of the "right to have rights".³⁰ Deprivation of rights represents the sure path to total domination over an individual.³¹ The second stage in the *making of corpses* is the *killing of moral personality*. Eliminating the choice between good and evil and depriving one's own person of its individuality, by the extirpation of morality, represents a decisive step in total mastery over consciousness. Arendt expresses herself in extremely harsh terms regarding the choices that citizens had to make under Nazi totalitarianism; they

and Arendt at One Hundred," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 2, no. 1 (2007): 77–85; Shinkyu Lee, "The Political vs. the Theological: The Scope of Secularity in Arendtian Forgiveness," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 50, no. 4 (2022): 670–95.

²⁸ In this study, we will focus exclusively on Hannah Arendt's conception of *radical evil*, even though she draws inspiration from Kant's perspective. Nevertheless, what is relevant in the current discussion is how Arendt is inspired to develop a theory of evil because of the horrifying actions perpetrated by the Nazi regime. These atrocities also led Bonhoeffer to reflect on the nature of stupidity.

²⁹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 459.

³⁰ Paul Formosa, "Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 6 (2007): 718.

³¹ Arendt, *The Origins*, 447–51.

were not faced with a balance between good and evil, but between crime and crime. Moreover, concentration camps turned death into an anonymous event, stripping it of personal significance and thereby demonstrating that, in reality, individuals never possessed anything of their own, not even their own selves. Martyrdom itself became impossible in the extermination camps because, as Hannah notes, once there is no more human solidarity, corrupted by ideology,³² thousands of people living in absolute loneliness, then the gesture of death for a noble purpose becomes useless, and this is the great success of totalitarianism.³³ The third and final stage (precisely because of its gravity) in achieving the monstrous goal of the unprecedented evil is the *transformation of the person into a superfluous entity through the destruction of individuality and spontaneity, and consequently, of any human trace of solidarity and freedom*,³⁴ Spontaneity and individuality make the human person human, imbuing it with value and meaning; in the absence of these essential elements of human existence, man becomes merely a bundle of changeable reactions at any time with any other bundle of reactions,³⁵ and the human person thus becomes superfluous – this being the purpose of the entire inhuman treatment of radical evil. However, the most difficult question regarding the absolute evil developed by totalitarian regimes is not about its definition but about the reason for its exercise. To this question, Arendt provides an unimaginable answer: the only reason totalitarian regimes choose to exercise their power through radical evil is because they desire their ideology to be entirely coherent. The totalitarian ideology, which relies on reshaping the past and precise planning of the future, cannot handle the creativity and spontaneity of the human being capable of thwarting its plans. Therefore, the solution is to eliminate any trace of what can be called human.³⁶ Power is the binding key. Ideology and power are thus the key concepts of totalitarianism as defined by Arendt. An ideology that seeks to eliminate humanity by reducing it to a mere string of reactions and pre-established slogans thus arrives at Bonhoeffer's definition.

³² Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 210.

³³ Arendt, *The Origins*, 451–53.

³⁴ Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 211.

³⁵ Arendt, *The Origins*, 456.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 458.

A connection?

Even though it might seem like we have veered away from the theory of stupidity, the radical evil discussed by Arendt would not be possible without the stupidity theorized by Bonhoeffer. Arendt presents the fact that the *factories of corpses* would not be possible without an intelligible, *previous preparation*, both historically and politically, of the *living corpses*,³⁷ of *ghastly marionettes with human faces*.³⁸ It's the same image used by the Protestant pastor when presenting a relationship with the stupid person:

In conversation with him, one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with him as a person, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil.³⁹

Depersonalization and the superfluity of the human person are the points of connection between radical evil and stupidity.

However, this does not imply, at first glance, that stupidity is a radical evil or, at least, a political one, but rather that it is a consequence of such actions. This surface view is not entirely wrong, but it is incomplete. Analyzing the two perspectives, that of absolute evil and that of stupidity, we can observe the relationship between them under a sociological framework: radical evil makes people stupid, and stupidity legitimizes political evil – considering that not every form of political evil is radical evil; but every radical evil is political evil. The explanation lies in the person who commits the evil, whether it be political or totalitarian, because only a political leader, by virtue of the power they hold, is capable of manifesting the horrifying actions of radical evil. This makes it a political evil, as the perpetrator possesses political power and acts according to a strategy with a specific objective against innocent people. Only a political totalitarian leader is capable, by virtue of the power he holds, of manifesting the horrifying actions of radical evil, thus being a political evil; however, not every political evil – terrorism, ethnic cleansing, killing based on race, ethnicity, or religion, or counter-evil – leads to depersonalization of the human being and, consequently, is not a radical evil. But, nevertheless,

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 447.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 455.

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 44.

it is extremely important to make a conceptual distinction. We have observed that power always needs legitimization from society. Such legitimization of a power that acts on one hand, either through radical evil or through political evil, could not exist without stupid people. Here is the key to the whole argumentation. Stupidity is at the core of both concepts of evil. Even though we have mentioned that radical evil makes people stupid, Arendt also acknowledges a premeditated preparation for this evil and, therefore, a stupidization preceding manifestation of evil. In this sense, for evil to be absolute or political evil, it needs stupidity, which, in Bonhoeffer's theory, is the greatest evil, and we can understand why.

Is there any way out?

Stupidity is an evil, and for Bonhoeffer, the stupid person is the greatest evil that can happen to a society, and throughout the argumentation, we have observed how stupidity underlies manifestations of radical evil so extreme that history could not relate to any precedent precisely because of their unprecedented atrocity. Nevertheless, from the outset of this study, there has always been a sense of hope. There must still be a way out of the dire trap of stupidity and the evil it produces. Stupidity, like evil, cannot be eternal and, implicitly, infinite. There is surely an exit, a window through which the happy dawn of an educated world can be glimpsed, liberated from the tyranny of the stupid. The totalitarianism of stupidity can only be stopped through inner liberation, by freeing oneself from the terrifying chains of imbecility. Bonhoeffer offers two extremely important plans to find the way to limit and even stop stupidity. Imbecility can only be stopped through an act of liberation, not through academic instruction. However, this act of inner liberation must be preceded by an act of outer liberation, which ultimately is supported and implemented only by political decision-makers, who must desire the inner wisdom and independence of citizens more than their stupidity. We are once again facing a sociological relationship of great importance that implies steps toward eliminating stupidity: political decision-makers must desire the independence and wisdom of the population and provide external liberation, which will lead to the act of inner liberation and thus escape from the yoke of imbecility.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 44.

Although it may seem simplistic, this relationship is the only one that can help the world, in the perspective of the Protestant pastor. Without these steps, any other attempt will not be successful. However, this path proposed by Bonhoeffer contains an element that subsequently regulates the entire social construct: the desire of political decision-makers. This desire of decision-makers should not be directed towards the total domination of the population, but towards its independence, towards respecting rights, and towards the responsible freedom assumed by citizens. It is known that political beliefs differentiate individuals and groups in accordance with ideological orientations and political preferences,⁴¹ which implicitly means that only a regime that assumes principles such as freedom, citizen rights, and independence can support the act of inner liberation of citizens and thus stop the greatest evil of society – stupidity.

The World's coming of age⁴² and the seeds of education - a life together for the better

In the letters sent from prison, Bonhoeffer spoke about the world reaching maturity and how this world rejects God. His eschatological vision, strongly influenced by his context, remains valid today. The world no longer feels the need for God and rejects His work. However, not all is lost. Christianity, which for the Protestant pastor undergoes a reconceptualization, is what can save this world from self-destruction. Christians are scattered like seeds in an unbelieving world, carrying with them the message of salvation, bearing the seeds of the kingdom of God.⁴³ This physical separation is not, however, an ideological separation. Christians are united by faith, by grace, by the Word of God; they are united in Christ,⁴⁴ and through this dispersion among unbelievers, they find their mission and work.⁴⁵

But for our theme, the image Bonhoeffer represents for the burden of freedom is significant. All people are free, and the unbelievers, in their freedom, must be respected for the choices they make. Christians,

⁴¹ Christian Staerklé, "Political Psychology," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. Second Edition, ed. James D. Wright (Elsevier, 2015), 429.

⁴² The theme of the world's *coming of age*, is developed by Bonhoeffer in his later works, see for example, Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 478–79.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 81.

respecting the freedom of others, bear an immense burden – *the burden of freedom*,⁴⁶ which presupposes, above all, seeing in those around you the image of the Creator, to whose service Christians have been called, that of bearing the joyful message of salvation.

This vision, connected with the theory of stupidity, helps us to outline a picture of solutions, not so much of premises. Stupidity, as we have observed, is the greatest evil a society can endure, because it can legitimize political power capable of radical or political evil. However, the solution, the healing of this society, is a life lived together by and with Christians who, through their message full of *spiritual love*, can bring liberation from the tyranny of stupidity.

This communion of Christians in Christ alone⁴⁷ is distinct from the assembly that stupidity presupposes. In the words of Cipolla, who theorized the five fundamental laws of stupidity,⁴⁸ the unequal distinction numerically is between imbeciles and non-imbeciles. The number of imbeciles is always underestimated (law 1); they will always act to the detriment of others without having anything to gain, even suffering losses themselves (law 3). Those who do not suffer from imbecility will underestimate the harmful influence exerted by an imbecile (law 4), and therefore, the stupid person is worse than a malefactor (law 5).⁴⁹ We see that there is a certain similarity between Bonhoeffer's theory and the laws proposed by Cipolla, but there are significant differences, especially in terms of concept. For Cipolla, the imbecile/non-imbecile ratio is an economic one, based on the harm-gain relationship; Cipolla's entire vision is an economic one (he himself being an economist), while Bonhoeffer seeks the roots of the problem. For Bonhoeffer, stupidity is an evil in the deepest sense of the term, and the profit/loss ratios are not of great importance to the Protestant pastor if society suffers at its deepest levels due

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 78.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 81.

⁴⁸ For an overview of the statistics of the behavioral implications of the fundamental laws of stupidity proposed by Cipolla, we recommend: Donny R. Bárcenas, Joel Kuperman and Marcelo N. Kuperman, "The Destructive Effect of Human Stupidity: A Revision of Cipolla's Fundamental Laws," *The European Physical Journal B* 93, no. 211 (2020); Ilaria Perissi and Ugo Bardi, "The Sixth Law of Stupidity: A Biophysical Interpretation of Carlo Cipolla's Stupidity Laws," *Systems* 9, no. 3 (2021); Piero Mella, "Intelligence and Stupidity – The Educational Power of Cipolla's Test and of the Social Wheel" *Creative Education* 8, (2017): 2515–34.

⁴⁹ Carlo M. Cipolla, *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011).

to stupidity. Therefore, unlike Cipolla's economic vision, the perspective offered by Hannah Arendt is closer to Bonhoeffer. Stupidity is an evil, legitimizes evil, and is a powerful tool in the hands of tyrants; hence, we need acts of inner liberation to open our horizon to the realities of the world and to see the lights of goodness.

Instead of conclusion

Stupidity is not a subject to be quickly disposed of. Unfortunately, it is vast and difficult to cover in a few words. Bonhoeffer's theory of stupidity enjoys a significant advantage. It theorizes about stupidity without defining its boundaries. Anyone can fall under the incidence of stupidity, but for Bonhoeffer, it's not so much the nature of stupidity that impresses, but rather its dire effects. Stupid people are capable of evil that they themselves cannot even comprehend. Through their docility and lack of spontaneity, they legitimize political evil. Indeed, as we have observed, stupid people undergo preparation in this regard. They are dehumanized, devoid of legal personality, morality, and ultimately of their inner freedom, and these stages lead to the legitimization of actions that surpass the understanding even of those who, in their utter stupidity, give their consent.

Bonhoeffer's context is defining for his theory, yet we observe that it remains highly relevant today. Even though in democratic countries there are no longer actions from the spectrum of *radical evil* as defined by Hannah Arendt, we still see remnants of totalitarian regimes that have left mentalities, programs, and institutions – true schools for the formation of *stupid consciences* – in their wake. Only the inner liberation of citizens preceded by an external liberation (which seems to be enjoyed today) can be the solution. Stupidity affects society, and as long as *schools of stupidity* exist, the world will not be a better place. True *universities of freedom* are needed where the discipline of inner responsibility can be learned. *Education liberates* from the yoke of programs that stifle spontaneity and forms spirits that judge the signs of the times personally and with universal impact. These are just a few of the solutions we can find to the problem of stupidity as theorized by Bonhoeffer.

Christ said: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8.32). This truth of freedom preached by Jesus himself is the solution. If we do not take responsibility for our own freedom and legitimize others to decide for us, the fate of stupidity will always be a

prosperous one. However, if we go through the difficult but not impossible process of finding the truth that will set us free, we will be able *to sing*, without remorse, *the requiem of stupidity*.