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How to Be "Good"

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Personal

A few days ago, my mother and I had another argument about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For her, I was once again "a traitor", although this time she didn't say it outright, just one of those young people whose minds had been warped by the West. For me, she was once again someone who supports the regime's actions, whether she consciously chose that stance or not, one of those people whose minds had been warped by Putin, yet each of us believed ourself to be right. As usual, she put forward arguments formulated in the same way they're articulated in the pro-government media, while I, as usual, tried to prove that killing people on the territory of another country is wrong and must be stopped. My verbal rhetorical skills are nothing, and in such situations, I tend to act more emotionally than rationally, so the dispute ultimately ends up right back where it started—we change the subject. It's still better than not talking at all, but each time there's a palpable tension between us, like an invisible wall of disappointment, a pain born of irreversibility and a longing for that "before" when I didn't have to think about such things.

My position is not unique; on contrary, it's quite common. It could be worse, as I know a fair number of people who have completely fallen out with their relatives and no longer speak to them, but there are still more who continue to keep in touch and absurdly change the topic from war to weather, from bombings to how marvellous the peonies are blooming this year. It's a mental civil war that no one wants, but at the same time, it's impossible to completely rid oneself of it. "You are so very wrong, to the point that the future realisation of this may be excruciating for you, but I still love you, and hearing your voice and knowing that you're doing quite well is more important to me than arguing with you, even about issues that seem existential—at least you're not being bombed."

If we abstract a bit, this personal situation easily translates to the entire country—Mother Russia and her dissenting sons and daughters who left the country to avoid a draft notice or a prosecution for imaginary crimes, each considering the other a renegade, where the children betrayed the Mother's past, and she betrayed their children's future.

I tried to explain everything to myself, to substantiate it logically, to rationalise it because you can't make sense of the situation only with emotions, their quantity and behaviour are so overwhelming at times that one can dry up, shrivel and wither away. A framework is needed, an understanding of where this seemingly unfillable chasm between us suddenly materialised from, and perhaps how to prevent this from happening in the future again.

This problem did not appear out of nowhere and manifests itself far from always as innocently as in my case. The entire war, the destruction, the brutal murders—this is the result of a much deeper malaise that has slowly grown in society over the years, taking firm root. As they say, small things compound. Step by step, moral, ethical, ideological boundaries shift and, to the tragedy of all, not always in the best direction.

I can blame everything on Putin, oligarchs, officials, security forces, those who support the system. I can blame "the Soviet legacy", for its damage to critical thinking, ideas about enemies surrounding the country or "the special path"[1], which are happily used and developed by Russian propaganda now. Or I can get angry and blame the whole country and myself too because it's all feels so hopeless at times. But instead of the two "eternal Russian questions"[2]: "Who is to blame?" and "What is to be done?" I would rather ask, "How is this possible at all?" and "Why?" How did they manage to convince people that this heinous atrocity was necessary, and why did the people believe in it?

Common

> "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." — Leo Tolstoy People rarely deem themselves to be wrong, and if

> they do, they immediately cease to be so because both the very fact of admitting wrongness and its consequences makes them right, magically. The old truth becomes untruth, and the new untruth becomes truth. The same goes for whether a person is good or bad. By default, habitually, people tend to consider themselves good, and in their perception they only become bad for a short time when the wrongness is being admitted. In that case, a person has either gone through a painful realisation of his or her past wrongness, regret, remorse, a kind of catharsis. Otherwise, if a person knows they are bad and still continues to do evil, he or she is either a sociopath, a psychopath, a maniac, or something worse. Few can continue to do what they consider wrong, immoral, evil, without experiencing cognitive dissonance, guilt, self-flagellation. One cannot remain in such a state for long, so a person naturally seeks a way out of it.

And there are two ways out—to accept the new truth, or to reject it and strengthen the old one. It does not matter which of these two truths is more correct and makes a person objectively good, which in turn does not mean that all viewpoints are equivalent and that objective truth does not exist; it means that our perception of it is always limited. Moreover, admitting one's wrongness is essentially acknowledging this exact limitation. It arises from the fact that access to information and knowledge, access to truth, from which our experience and values are built, is far from always the same for everyone, but nevertheless, there are moral and religious imperatives, objective traits inherent in many

cultures. For example, Christian “thou shalt not kill”.

In nature, it is normal that animals kill each other for food, protection of territory, procreation, and for many other reasons—this is natural and is part of their behaviour. But if we take the most social animals, such as primates or elephants, even they have altruism and mutual aid, avoidance of intraspecific aggression, conflict resolution through submission or reconciliation instead of killing, mourning for the dead, and caring for others’ offspring in one form or another, despite not having any moral imperatives. For humans, the very idea of “thou shalt not kill” as a moral principle isn’t new and emerged long ago in various ancient cultures and religious traditions around the world: the “negative confession” in Ancient Egypt, ahimsa in Hinduism and Jainism, condemnation of violence and advocacy for a life led by good thoughts, good words, and good deeds in Zoroastrianism, and so on. Killing, as well as causing harm to a living being, i.e., violence, has long been considered evil by humans. Society began to recognise the value of human life and limited violence for its stability and well-being.

In this sense, we can say that there are certain objective truths, universally accepted moral principles, signifying the value of human life. But wars still happen. And how do those who start them justify them? By the survival of some “group”, whether their own or a friendly one, by self-defence or the defence of “higher values” and superiority of their morals, which are often marked by paranoid fantasies, a cult of personality, confrontation with “evil”, insidious enemies ready to undermine the country from within, a “preemptive strike”—after all, if

you don't attack first, your foes will attack you, and it's not a sin to defend yourself because in a sense, it prevents of greater violence, right? The Russian state uses the same rhetoric: "protection of the Russian-speaking population", "NATO threat", "historical unity", and other[3]. The same words are now in the heads of my parents and a big part of the country.

Why haven't they suddenly, or at least over these two-plus years, realised that their country has been doing evil? It's easier to maintain the existing worldview by inertia than to rebuild it. To abandon it means to put something personal and important at risk. It was built up over the years, hammered into heads from birth. Some serious upheavals, crises that would overturn one's view of the world are needed to destroy it. But isn't war such an upheaval? As it turns out—no, rather, even the opposite. The media and society around only confirm old beliefs that there are enemies all around and that "defending" the Motherland is a sacred duty, while contradictory information is ignored or simply not allowed to be "broadcasted", and if it does seep through, it is automatically considered "untruth". Here, state censorship that has been diligently working for years is no longer needed because in every head a little censor has grown.

Artistic [intermission]

* *Richard Oelze.* Expectation*. *1935-36.* You can see this Richard

Oelze's painting in MoMA in New York. In real life, it looks way more ominous and silently terrifying than it's on the screen for you now. If you have a chance, I do recommend you to go to the museum and find it there.

When I first saw it in real life, I thought the people in the painting were not waiting for or expecting the dark cloud but following it. Even though both interpretations can be true, they either passively wait or blindly follow, I still prefer the latter because it resonates more with me. Moreover, the people in the painting aren't just following something they probably know is dark and potentially dangerous, ignoring that fact, but many of them are wearing white overcoats.

This is an important detail for me now, despite I don't know whether Richard Oelze put it there for the same symbolism purposes or to create a contrast and hint the innocence of the characters. This struck me deeply because of the now-popular and widely used Russian idiom "wearing a white coat". It's an ironic reference to a person who acts self-righteously or sanctimoniously, often highlighting his or her own perceived moral superiority. Such a person tends to criticise others while presenting oneself as being on the high moral ground, innocent, pure, good. It might be true, yes, yet the person's focus on that makes him or her typically look apologetic and insincere.

Literary

> "You're not going to believe who this guy reminds me of." — Mike Godwin on Twitter, 16 Mar 2022 One of my favourite pieces of literature and theatre is C.P. Taylor's play "Good"[4]. Having seen it live for the first time (and then reading and watching recorded) I was shocked and terrified by how accurate and shrewd were the parallels between the play's events and the events I had to witness myself in real time.

The main character of the play is Halder, a liberal-minded writer who works at a university in the 1930s Germany and teaches students about Goethe[5], among other things literary. He's not evil and has no intention of doing any harm. On the contrary, he deems himself "a good man" who lives a simple life, works, writes, and takes care of his wife Helen and their children.

At the beginning of the play, Halder and his friend Maurice, who's a Jew, discuss the current state of affairs and both can't believe it. It causes them distress and confusion more than anything. Maurice says that the anti-Jew propaganda makes no sense and thinks that "Germany depends on Jewish brains"; hence the Party is "bound to drop all that racial shit they had thrown around to get their votes" later "for the survival of the bloody state".

> Maurice: *Objectively. Intellectually* . . . The Nazis . . . That's just flag-waving to get hold of the masses . . . This anti-Jew hysteria . . . Now it's got them where they wanted to go . . . <...> Halder:

> I'll get you a drink, Maurice . . . Relax . . . You're right . . . All that anti-Jew rubbish . . . You're right . . . Just balloons they throw up in the air to distract the masses . . . You're right. If earlier they described the situation as "a bloody neurosis", later they say it's "bloody reality".

At the same time, the Nazi Party notices Halder's pro-euthanasia novel, inspired by the difficulties he went through with his senile mother. He's given a choice to join the Party and develop his career. His wife, Helen, supports that and says that he could even lose his lectureship if he doesn't enrol (as the rumours go). Under all that pressure, Halder joins the Party, justifying it first and foremost with love for family:

> Halder: I'm doing it because I love you . . . You know that. If it was just myself, I'd take a chance. I'm not one hundred per cent sure about Hitler . . . You understand that . . . I love you and the children . . . At the same time he's started having an affair with his student Anne, who's also reacts either passively or supportively to his decision. The whole play is written brilliantly, but the dialogues between Halder and Anne are the most painful to observe and full of bitter and tragic irony:
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> Anne: I think . . . you see . . . People just survive and live . . . It doesn't seem to matter what kind of government people have. They survived through all kinds of terrible times, didn't they? You find somebody you love . . . and you have a family . . . and

> look after them . . . and try not to harm anybody . . . Isn't that what happens? . . . In the end you have to survive . . . And the less you harm people in surviving . . . Halder: It's not only survival, is it? Joining the Nazis. If people like us join them . . . instead of keeping away from them, being purist . . . And pushed them a bit towards humanity . . . Is that kidding yourself? Anne: What if they push *us* the other way? Halder: Yes . . . It could happen . . . Yes . . . If it did . . . I'd get out . . . No question about it . . . I'd pull myself away . . . I'd get out of the country . . . We'd get out of the country . . . Despite at first it seems hard for Halder to justify his decision completely, and he's still doubtful about Hitler, everyone round him supports his decision, considering it a necessity, except, of course, Maurice:
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> Maurice: You joined the Nazis! *You* . . . For fuck's sake Halder: I *told* you I joined the Nazis . . . Maurice: The reality is coming to me . . . Jesus . . . Johnnie . . . God in heaven . . . Halder: Facts of life . . . Thereafter, Halder's life flips over and follows a downward spiral as we witness it as external observers. He's now a "fucking Nazi S.S. officer" and officially a humanity expert, expected to make recommendations and arrangements "on general humane grounds".

In a state of panic, now real, Maurice demands his friend to help him to get out of Germany, yet Halder finds excuses and refrains from helping

his friend, saying that it's not a sensible action for a "bloody officer in the S.S." even "during this temporary racialist aberration". He dissuades Maurice from going anywhere and again points out that Hitler, "a mystic idealist", is not going to survive another six months in the "still capitalist country". Moreover, he says he loves Jews, their culture, and calls *Mein Kampf* rubbish, describing the whole situation is "a political hysteria".

Soon, he receives a letter while reading which he understands that it is, in fact, a list of books, books that he also likes, but at the end of the letter he realises that he, a writer himself, is ordered to organise the Book Burning Ceremony at the university.

He tries to rationalise it, justify it, thinking to himself that "man does not live by books alone" and burning is a symbolic act. He has left his wife and children already for Anne at that point, and now she's his "voice of reason", a voice that supports him. She believes that the book burning is just a gesture that doesn't mean anything, and "most people aren't even aware those books exist".

> Anne: All we can do is hold on to each other. If we're good to each other. And the people round us . . . If we try to the utmost to be good . . . *The bonfire flares up.* What else can we do?
> Halder: I haven't even read Einstein. When *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, happens, during which the Nazis carry out a pogrom targeted at Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues, it shocks Halder. He attempts to understand it at

first, but then tries to justify. He calls the operation "a bad thing, no question about it", "excess", "the roughneck in the party", yet later in a long monologue describes it as a "humane action" that is meant to "shock the Jews into the reality of their situation".

Halder: This Jew operation tonight. It weighed on me . . . along with the food I couldn't digest properly . . . I enjoyed the duck . . . at the same time . . . He admits to himself that he has his things to care about, and "the Jews and their problems are very far down on the list". All he fears is if the Nazis stick him in a concentration camp, or he gets a cancer, or Anne stops loving him and runs off with another man, or his own personal happiness:

Halder: *Emotionally. Intellectually* . . . As an intellectual concept it's fairly high as a moral problem . . . The thing is, I am fundamentally a happy person . . . That's what it is . . . That's the problem. I'm a happy person . . . Absolutely . . . The reality around Halder blurs, and the play's non-linear, fragmented narrative supports it well. He starts thinking that everything terrible that has happened, including to Maurice, who is supposedly already tortured and killed, was a mistake, and yet he thinks that the whole situation is complex.

Halder: What we are doing, Maurice . . . listen to this . . . is we are allowing ourselves to be trapped by obvious, stock responses

> . . . Instead of daring to confront ourselves with reality maybe, Maurice, maybe . . . It's the Jews' fault . . . They are responsible for pushing Germany into this Jewish, moralistic, humanistic, Marxist total fuck up . . . At the end of the play, during a long scene, we see Anne helping Halder to put on the S.S. uniform while their talk about the previous years.
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> Halder: Yes . . . We probably are . . . good . . . Yes . . . Whatever that means . . . Anne: You know what it means. Halder: Yes . . . Anne: Remember it then. And a few moments later, at the very end, he finds himself as one of the officers in Auschwitz.

Thus, through a series of compromises and self-justifications dictated by supposedly good intentions, Halder goes from a 'good' man to an accomplice to heinous crimes. He justifies his co-operation with the regime by wanting to help people, to soften politics from within, and to protect his family. His arc is driven by passivity, by the need to adapt to survive. Step by step, the line between good and evil blurs for Halder, and it's alarming to see this gradual transformation, often only visible from the outside.

Unfortunately, Halder's example isn't unique. We can find other examples happening throughout history on different scales. To list just a few... Adolf Eichmann, the bureaucrat responsible for deporting millions of Jews to death camps, was an ordinary man who believed he was merely doing his job conscientiously. Évariste Gamelin, the protagonist of Anatole France's novel "The Gods Are Athirst", was a

young artist who initially joined the French Revolution with idealistic fervour, but gradually descended into fanaticism and violence, ultimately justifying his actions, including sending innocent people to the guillotine, as necessary sacrifices for the greater good of the Republic. During the Russian Civil War, people with good intentions of freedom and a better life overthrew the Emperor, killed his entire family without a real reason, and created a state responsible for the oppression and suffering of unprecedented millions of people inside and outside the country, justifying the violence along the way as a necessity in attempts to build the glorious communism[6]. Or these days in Russia, I see a similar social dynamic when artists, actors, writers, scientists, politicians and ordinary people "swear an oath" to the brutal regime—some do nothing and hide, some become voices of propaganda, others go to war without even understanding why, saying that "once it's started, it has to be done", believing that they're "defending their interests".

In any of these cases, there are people who hold guns and who hold pens, those who give commands and those who obey, those who believe in the greater good and those who just have to adapt, those for whom it is a personal choice and those on whom it is forced. We must not regard them as equally evil and must consider their role in what is happening individually, but we must also realise that the system as a sum of individuals is far more frightening than it is in itself. Without these individuals, the system simply could not exist, yet it's the system is what made them into what they are by abusing their passivity and beliefs.

It's not a product of any particular ideology but rather a general human flaw that is exploited in the same way by institutions, religions, and ideologies through their propaganda. People who are "good" become "evil" when the justification of that evil becomes routine, when that evil becomes "banal"[7], hidden behind a façade of mediocrity and ordinariness. The people who commit it are not necessarily villains in the classic sense—they may be good husbands or wives, loving friends; they may genuinely believe they are just doing their duty, they are just being good. Their level of passivity can also differ. Most don't get involved at all, humbly nod, and prefer to avoid politics in any form. Are they good or evil? The answer would be subjective and laden with the personal and emotional. Evil feeds on them, proliferates in their passivity, disinterest, apathy as in a fertile ground, while all that time they do nothing and just want to be good and live a normal, stable, simple life, trying to protect their little world and distance themselves from reality.

When a set of beliefs, a doctrine, is presented to them from the top, it's easier to accept it and then follow it than to develop their own. But it is this conformism and refusal of independent moral judgement, this readiness to be a cog in the machine without thinking about the consequences of one's actions that, compounded over the years, can lead to historical tragedies. This is an evil that is committed not by malice, but by inertia, by the habit of obedience, by the personal belief of being good. People tend to justify their actions by good intentions, external factors, higher values, or worse, patriotism—a word that's

being perverted and has no real meaning any more besides “blindly and proudly serve your country”. Doing something they believe is “good”, people feel they obtain a “moral licence” for less ethical actions in the future. They tend to explain negative actions by external factors, and positive ones by internal, but for others they do exactly the opposite—good deeds are blamed on circumstances and bad deeds on personal qualities. They may sincerely believe in their goodness but ignore, rationalise, or refuse to accept the negative consequences.

No external circumstances remove our personal moral responsibility for our actions. The capacity for moral choice is among the things that make us human, and we should not give it up, even in the face of the most ordinary manifestations of evil. Ignoring those choices, making them unconsciously, we risk getting manipulated a little at a time, eventually doing things that are totally against our values and conscience.

Perhaps balloons in the sky aren’t there to distract you; perhaps they aren’t really balloons; perhaps they’re just the first step. Ignoring them, you risk not recognising yourself, your friends or your relatives in a few years, and the result might not please you.

Goodness isn’t given; goodness is earned. Being good is neither a default state nor a habit; being good is work, the most human and the most difficult work of all.

Notes

1. Germany had *Sonderweg*, which does translate to "special path". It is a concept that describes the belief that the country had a unique historical and cultural development that set it apart from other Western nations. The idea was used to justify Germany's distinct political trajectory, which ultimately led to the rise of Nazism and World War II. I bet many countries have a similar idea and it doesn't necessarily lead to tragedies if it's not misused by the government to justify the harmful politics. In the Russian context, the term "особый путь" (osobyy put') is often used to describe Russia's perceived unique historical, cultural, and geopolitical position, distinct from both Western and Eastern nations. This concept is often employed by Putinists to justify Russia's political system, foreign policy decisions, and its resistance to adopting Western liberal democratic values. Like the German *Sonderweg*, Russia's "special path" narrative can be seen as a way to rationalize and legitimize the country's divergence from the democratic norms and principles of other developed nations. So far, it has brought more harm than good.
2. The "eternal Russian questions" refer to two quintessential and "cursed" questions that have been at the heart of Russian intellectual discourse for centuries: "Кто виноват?" (Kto vinovat?, "Who is to blame?") and "Что делать?" (Chto delat'?, "What is to be done?"). These questions have been explored by many Russian writers, philosophers, and intellectuals, such as Alexander Herzen and Nikolay Chernyshevsky. The persistence of these "eternal questions" underscores the ongoing struggle to define Russia's identity, direction, and place in the world.
3. Putin's speech speech announcing "special military operation" uses the same Newspeak in one way or another. It is, however, not unique or new and mirrors the propaganda that has been going on for years, intensifying since 2014, after the Annexation of Crimea.
4. It might be available on National Theatre Live, or you can find some other recorded performances on Youtube for free. Plus, there's a film of the same name with Viggo Mortensen, which myself I haven't seen. But I'm afraid some part of the disturbing magic of the original will inevitable be lost in the film if you make the narrative linear and slow it down.
5. I find it incredibly ironic, and it's such a great character detail. In Goethe's "Faust," the protagonist makes a pact with

Mephistopheles, essentially selling his soul in exchange for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. Though the pact Halder makes is more nuanced and doesn't happen overnight; he makes a series of small pacts instead.

6. Spoiler: they didn't build it. I recommend reading "The Foundation Pit" and/or "Chevengur" by Andrei Platonov if you want to learn more hot tips on how to build communism.
7. The phrase "banality of evil" was coined by Hannah Arendt in her book "Eichmann in Jerusalem" (1963) to describe how Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi bureaucrat I mentioned in the essay.

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