

## **“The philosophical implications of theory and practice”**

«The experience that we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie – the truth lies outside, in what we do” – Slavoj Zizek, *Violence: six sideways*, 2008, p. 47

The passage above iterated by the Slovenian Marxist and continental philosopher Slavoj Zizek relates to the socio-philosophical conundrum of the narrative, concerning the greater tales that people construct for themselves to make a justified belief as to why they are performing the acts that they do. These have ramifications for nationalism, totalitarianism and greater ideological struggles, which are precisely the fields which Zizek himself has worked within as a theorist. Largely through his philosophical framework of Hegelian idealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, in addition to his intimately intertwined experience of growing up in the era of the Cold War in communist Yugoslavia with its later Balkan nationalisms and eventual breakup, he has worked with the ideological underpinnings of Stalinism and Nazism, among others. His fundamental assertion states that we will find the true nature of the ideologies at hand not necessarily in how they present themselves to the world in their writings, but in their realistic manifestations. This blatantly obvious fact is however interesting when we also observe the justifications that go concurrently with actions, no matter how despicably inhumane, as testified in the Holocaust and the Stalinist regime. Although it may seem perfectly reasonable to people working within the system i.e. if they have been brainwashed into such a line thought, or genuinely believe it, they consciously uphold a lie of which they know the moral implications of. Over a certain time period, they come to confront ethically challenging predicaments. They nonetheless continue to act so, often in fear of authority or through the sheer value of candid obedience. But is this a sensible interpretation to cling to? Is there not a case to be made for the

individual, or collective for that matter, which embodies an unscrupulous moral integrity? Which path is humanity supposed to traverse if the opposite is largely true? If an unethical situation arises, should not upright human beings do what they know to be normatively good, i.e. if they have a moral realist core, and react to the injustice in a confrontational fashion?

The Zizekian statement is attractive to believe for a multitude of reasons, as its implications could say something about the dissonance between thought (mind) and action (body), revoking a Cartesian-like dualist problem, although its possible ontological character is far less relevant than the incisive philosophical issue of what it means to be human and its relation to morality. “The experience of that we have of our lives from within” speaks to the limited viewpoint of reality that we have as a core part of ourselves: it is affected by society at large, various institutions, friends, family and personal inclinations and preferences. Zizek himself has told of the binding story that united the amalgamation of ethnicities that Yugoslavia in his day was composed of, in his own idiosyncratic humour. In short, when Zizek served in the Yugoslav army at Karlovac in Croatia, he and his comrades in arms used to tell jokes about each other’s ethnic background based on stereotypes (e.g. that Slovenians are greedy while Montenegrins are lazy). In the diverse environment of Yugoslavia, where people were radically different from each other in terms of religion, ethnicity, geography etc. the thing that brought them together in this instance was not a belief in communist doctrine, but rather jokes. This construction of unity helped them to cope with the problems that diversity of background and limited likeness entail. It may remind some of Plato’s noble lie of the metals or Hitler’s idea that Aryans were superior, Jews inferior coupled with the need to conquer *Lebensraum* in the East: it is an accompanying framework for more easily regarding their actions as justified. Likewise, another example gives is what he calls *belief through another*: parents pretend for their children that Santa exists,

and by virtue of the children growing up in an environment around Christmas times where this is essentially an axiomatic truth, it *becomes* true. In other words, the parents do not believe it themselves, but they choose to do so for the sake of the kids. The second part of the equation, regarding the veracity of our external actions as opposed to internal lies to give them some justified backbone or spirit, is what we do *in itself*: making the children happy by constructing an artificial, more exciting fantasy world. Related to this is Žižek's notion that true happiness lies in delusional fantasy, to smoothen the edges of a rough reality. His premise alludes to his central stance on the individual/collective conundrum, that as the world is gruesome, the only way to change something is by means of massive collective action against the system itself, or it needs to collapse by itself; a single person can do little in the way of reform. Returning to the anecdote of belief through another, it is reasonable to think that narratives, although in themselves socially fabricated, function as instruments of justification to a meaningful end, materializing in the world as normatively beneficial actions and effects. These flesh out the *truth* of our action which Žižek refers to.

On the other hand, Žižek's belief in internal story/external action seems to ignore the significance that an ideological belief system can have in itself. Otherwise, it is difficult to see what could have possibly led them to commit atrocities. Viktor Frankl, a Jewish author and survivor of the Holocaust, understood what Žižek was referring, with some Nazi guards justifying themselves by assuring that they were doing the right thing. But this does not take into account the purely brutal acts which SS officers could commit against the inmates of the concentration and labour camps; an ideological commitment was at the core of what at least some of them were doing. Virulent antisemitism and xenophobia legitimated their actions. The truth that inspired them, viz. Jews are dirty people of an alien race and certain inferior people need to be removed

as rodents, materialized directly in hurting them and other vulnerable groups in the Nazi regime, like homosexuals, Slavs and Roma people. In this case, as the old maxim goes, there was “truth in thought, word and deed”. Another completely contrasting example could be reflecting upon all the beliefs that various natural and social scientists, leaders and entrepreneurs would have held in finding their discoveries and making the decisions that they did. Wilhelm II of Germany modernized his army and navy to make the German Empire greater in territorial size via colonial ventures, for his belief that his nation was glorious and deserved a place in the sun. Antonio Meucci may not have conceived of the telephone as he eventually invented it, but it is reasonable to assume that he and other entrepreneurs did all their tinkering, improvement of earlier products and experimentation with the belief that they could make the world a better place. Hence it is reasonable to assume that the unity of theory and practice both hold truth, and that “truth”/realization of theory, at least in part, becomes real in practice.

An essential understanding of the quote requires a certain background knowledge, which makes it worthwhile to emphasize the historical, social and political context that Žižek lived through: the Cold War, the Yugoslav wars, recurrent Balkan nationalisms and Balkanization. The narrative that respectively brought Western liberal democratic capitalists and Eastern communists together in each of their own civilizational axis, was the narrative at play, concerning demonizing “the Other”, which is a cornerstone of his philosophy. Without it, the conflict in and of itself would seem absurd without some spirit and background story to it: surely, there are the economic and political systems that originated the conflict, but without the tales of the Other, true or false, there would be considerable difficulties in convincing an entire nation or people to develop fatal nuclear weapons capable of obliterating all life on earth, or allocate resources to the military or secret agency when they could have

financed other enterprises like education and healthcare, the history aside. Really, it would be hard and less effective to pull off such a thing, even with a veritable threat, unless you have an ideology to influence the populace with. As Zizek himself put it, “theory is better than reality”. I believe that Zizek’s view is all the more convincing, with real actions superseding all theoretical foundations, coming to the flesh and bone of the matter, so to speak. Actions speak more than words.

To conclude, we have explored the possible avenues of interpreting and hashing out against Zizek’s statement. On the one hand, his assertion is philosophically interesting when considering the upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with reference to the ideology of the Third Reich the Cold War and the east/west political divide or Iron Curtain. The manifestations of ideology are the only real truth to grapple with; the ideology is just there to legitimate the powers at hand and convince more people to its ideological ranks. It also makes it more bearable to endure a harsh reality. The story we tell ourselves seems not to be sufficient for explaining what actions entail: the truth fundamentally lie in what we choose to do. Although people like scientists and the Great Man of history may be construed as being influenced by their own tales and beliefs, what they accrue is the result of the acts and doings themselves.