

The circulus vitiosus of fundamentalisms

Or how to undo the noose that ties up power, greed and fear?

Henk Oosterling (EUR)

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[Fragment The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: 236.03-242.25]

While Socrates roamed the streets of Athens spoiling the minds of eager young men, on the agora of that very same metropolis the best of men, the aristoi, debated democracy's fate, the birth and ruin of which they contemplated on the stages of their amphitheatres. Torn between fear and pity - between terror and compassion as Aristotle stated in his *Poetics* - the Greek leaders of a world surrounded by barbarians not as much reflected upon their own behaviour as contemplated the tragic decisions of their mythological ancestors, immortalized by artistic reason.

Nowadays philosophy, politics and arts still are integral aspects of democracy. However, the stage has changed. Democracy's current stage is still spherical, i.e. a global space, but it has become virtual. Our democratic space is called mediocracy, the ruling of the media. Was not 'agan meden' as 'stand midway between' the ultimate focus of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*? This ethical imperative has now become our technological fate. And our faith: we seem to have no choice but to believe in this mediocrity.

Is critical philosophy no longer contesting this belief? On the mediocratic stage sometimes the paradoxes of Zeno are newly performed. Zeno, as we know, was the pre-Socratic logician who translated the stable and unchanging worldview of his master Parmenides in concrete metaphors of competing animals. His proto-Fontainian parables were recently rephrased in terms of contemporary intelligence. Let me remind you of the profound epistemological reflections of one of our contemporary aristoi:

“Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones”

Indeed, even the speedy American roadrunner that starts a split second later will never outrun the immobilized but highly explosive turtle. Donald Rumsfeld, U.S.'s Secretary of Defence, is the Zeno of our times. The former wrestling champion does not shun profound philosophical reflection. But he is only a secretary of Defence, i.e. not the keeper, but the messenger of the secret. 'Geheimrat' as Goethe once was.

So, he is only the carrier of the stone on the bottom of which the secret is written by the ruler of game, the governor, the 'agathokalos', the Good and Beautiful. His name is Bush, George Bush, the one who fights the dragon. And I guess by now you will

surmise who the Bad is. In a dual world, in a world where there only two kinds of people face each other – this is the favourite turn of phrase of the Good – in this interfaced world the Bad cannot be anyone else but Osama Bin Laden.

However, once we press this dialectical rhetoric we realize that it is not the Bad who is the enemy of the good. The real enemy of the Good is the better. Rumsfeld is even worse than the better. It is he, who is the Ugly. Of course, we are tempted to understand the Ugly in aesthetic terms, i.e. as the negative of the Beautiful: inelegant, distasteful, unpleasant, deformed, disfigured, ghastly, grim, misshapen, and even monstrous. But I would rather emphasize the moral aspects as Kant did in his *Critique of Judgement* when he made the Beautiful into the symbol of the Good.

Then, Ugly is first and for all ‘mean’, in the sense of ‘a mean disposition’: callous, contemptible, cruel, despicable, malicious, nasty, shabby, shameful, small-minded, sneaky, vicious, and very ungenerous. ‘Mean’ refers to means, measure, and medium. In the German language this connotation is even more punctually expressed: ‘mean’ means ‘gemein’ that further refers to ‘gemeinsam’, indicating the public cause, something publicly acknowledged. As such it is an index for the average, a touch of mediocrity, commonplace. It is the ordinary, and by implication of what Nietzsche, trying to unravel occidental nihilism sprung from the heart of Christianity, in *The Birth of Tragedy* qualified as the pre-moral, aesthetic ‘bad’ or ‘das Schlichte’. ‘Das Schlichte’ is topped off, made flat, lives at the same low intensity, does not stand out. It opposes the best, the aristocracy. It is the ‘demos’, the people: an inauthentic ‘wild bunch’ that is not able to master themselves, let alone to govern a city, as Foucault pointed out in his last texts.

Once we interpreted the Ugly in moral terms, more than being the opposite of the Beautiful Good, he turns out to be a trivial reflection of the Bad, that is still connected to the Good. The Ugly is the mediator in between the Good and the Bad. A secretary with the quality of a medium, faking to be an oracle. In order to avoid being asked who has thrown the first stone, the Good will finally hand over his stones to the Ugly, stones without a secret, to throw them at the Bad. ‘Shoot’, the Good says. But in a barren rocky landscape the ballistic reach of the Ugly is as good as a stone’s throw.

On a reception-aesthetical level this explains why the film begins and ends with narrow escapes of the Ugly. He is the plot’s connection, its relational tissue. But in the very end, when the shootout takes place in the spherical amphitheatre with only dead soldiers as its audience, the Ugly is *de facto* not taken into account. The Good already pacified him before hand, emptying his revolver. For the Good, the proof of the pudding is in the anticipation. While anticipating he is always reasonable, even capable of sharing.

While the Good reflects on the long term, the Ugly makes small calculations and mediocre reflections. He outsmarts his opponents cunningly. The Good is a wise guy, the Ugly a smart ass, the Bad a real bad ass. In the final instance even the Bad is only relevant as the dialectical legitimization of the Good, i.e. as Evil. He has no scruple, breaks all contracts in order to double his gain, but loses in the end. It is true, the Good breaks his contracts too, but only when these are no longer profitable on the basis of a shared contract. He respects the basis terms of the contract and does not kill for a few dollars more. Nevertheless, he too is only in for the money. After all, we should not overlook that the Good is a bounty hunter. He earns his money by plotting against authorities, conspiring with convicts and cashing ever increasing bounties. Taking this into account, the fundamental issues triggered by the cinematographic imagination of this magnificent movie to my opinion are: who authorizes democratic

law, when is men's conviction changing him into a convict and how are bounties laundered into cash flow?

Rephrasing these issues on the level where Parmenides and Plato joined forces brings in aspects of mythology and enlightenment. On the level of Bush and Bin Laden these are overtrumped by pseudo-theology and information technology (IT). These two legitimizing discourses join hands in what I prefer to label as ITheology. But then again, since we're all in for the money, real decisions might in the final instance be taken by financial aristocrats speculating on the contemporary agora, i.e. the stock exchange. This opens a moral perspective: are there any fundamental values? If it is plausible to allege that nowadays market strategy overtrump all geopolitical strategies, then – by implication - all values are tested by their market value. This global short-circuiting creates a vicious circle. This noose is slowly tightened by supplementary contractions between prophets and profit, between provocations and proofs, between poor performance and power play.

[fragment GBU 243.00-248.28]

1. Preliminary remarks

Oke, let's get real and leave the imaginary order. Stereotypes are the main ingredients of cinematographic imagination. It all fits. Real life needs more precise evaluation. Moral stereotypes most of the time end up being highly ambiguous. Not in the least because, as Zizek so ingeniously illustrated, political reality, i.e. mediocracy, has gained a cinematographic quality itself and in becoming more real than real, as Baudrillard before him enigmatically argued, turned into hyperreality. What has all this to do with a *circulus vitiosus*?

a. circulus vitiosus

A vicious circle is a process that is enhanced and destroyed by 'positive' feedback: an economic downwards spiral, a total war, bad teachers and bad grading. Processes like these can be stopped by facilitating financial and economic incentives and by organizing mediation. Sometimes only a change in mentality brings the solution. This paradigmatic shift puts the collapsing system on a different level. Philosophical viciousness in tautological or contradictory systems hinges on false argumentation lines: the existence of god is proven by referring to the Bible as God's word. Premises and conclusions cover each other.

A *circulus vitiosus* is always viciously encircling a system that is after total legitimization. Its effort to rationally found itself in itself needs to be exhaustive. A vicious circle argument suffers from a universalizing and totalizing pretence. Its implications cover the whole universe. It is taking all being(s) into account. External influences that negate its premises are also taken into account, but only in order to integrate these in its systematic endeavour. Its political performance is terror; the methodological manifestations are not paradoxes, contradictions, and antinomies – these are all reparable - but an aporia that finally destroys its consistency and coherency. In a mixed discourse one can say that aporetic theories are terrorizing and suicidal. Exhaustive feedback causes the final implosion of the system. This is however prevented by an ultimate, non disputable reference to a transcendent position that is beyond (e)valuation. This absolute value is the final guarantee of consistency and coherence.

When this transcendence is expelled all totalizing efforts are bound to collapse. The three masters of suspicion – Marx, Nietzsche, Freud - killed their own systematic effort

to counter subject-centred rationality. Marx' theory on infrastructural determination of philosophy is the result of the presupposed infrastructure, Nietzsche's will to power does not destroy but reinforces metaphysics, at least according to Heidegger. What are the unconscious urges that prompted Freud to formulate his theory on the Unconscious? In psychopathological sense self-destructive processes are triggered through feedback of two defective bodily functions. Negative feedback finally destroys the organism. Auto immune disease blocks the ability of the organism to identify what is friend or what is foe.

The vicious circle I thematize touches upon discourses that focus the logistics of current globalization. Its crucial parameters are mediatization and informatization, its dispositive TV, WWW and ICT. The content of these discourses concern the founding of 'all there is' in an ontology that automatically implies a morality. Description is prescription. Naturalistic fallacy is no issue. The participants to this global debate are four fundamentalisms: religious fundamentalism, enlightenment fundamentalism, marketfundamentalism, and autofundamentalism.

[schema circ vit survey]

b. one value logic

Fundamentalism is characterized by the reduction of all values to one value.

Their convictions transform the others into convicts. Their legitimizations enhance each other mediamatically and discursively. Pressure is executed on the rope both connects and strangles the world.

Religious fundamentalism is the most obvious, with islamist neo-fundamentalism and Christian pro life activism as its most explosive appearances and salafism and neo-conservatism as their legitimizing discourses. In *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* Tariq Ali has convincingly argued what most of us already knew: that fundamentalism is no longer an exclusive feature of monotheistic, abrahamic religion. Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikh, according to Brian Victoria even Zen Buddhism has its own fundamentalist versions.

Reli-fundamentalism was and is still countered by an appeal to the reason based faculties of self-consciousness. Christian eschatology has been transposed to a finalizing historical worldview that favours later developments over earlier, using qualifications like primitive, feudal and pre-modern to situate present day worldviews that do not exclusively favour reason over faith. This Hegelian scheme conceptualizes myth and religion as predecessors of reason based scientific thought. The crucial term is 'enlightenment' in a non-religious, science based sense. But in denying its own auto-immune impact on society, reason's counter attack can easily turn into Enlightenment fundamentalism.

Once its crucial values - freedom and autonomy - are reinterpreted in economic terms and reduced to one single value - market value - another fundamentalism comes into play: a market fundamentalism that reduces individual autonomy and freedom to mere functions of free market mechanisms.

But the most invisible, yet nearly omnipresent fundamentalism reduces both man and market - the selfish self or 'autos' - on mobile vectors. With automobility becoming nearly a constitutional right the most illustrious of all fundamentalism comes to the fore: auto-fundamentalism.

The giant's struggle between these fundamentalisms is fought out on a global scale. Their interactions and transactions constitute a vicious circle. This devil's circle is like a discursive noose that hangs around our necks like a chain of pearls. All stereotypes are applied to outdo the others. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly all play their role. The Good finally wins but only through deceit and bluff poker, always having one more card up his sleeve.

Four different players, it will be suggested, have positioned themselves over the last 30 years. In a sloganesk turn we can indicate their focus as myth, mind, market and mobility. What happens when these players are used to forestall or found a worldview with no less than universalistic pretensions? This global game is played by politicians, policy makers, opinion leaders and organisations. It is managed by media tycoons, top managers, security services and neo-tribal terrorists. These agents coalesce into an immense and unprecedented power play the inevitably of which is underpinned by argumentations with ever more fundamentalist undertones.

The different players have positioned themselves over the last 30 years: myth, mind, market and mobility. What happens when these players are used to forestall or found a worldview with universalistic pretensions? This global game is played by politicians, policy makers, opinion leaders and organisations. It is managed by media tycoons, super managers, security services and neo-tribal terrorists. These forces perform an immense power play. This game is underpinned by argumentations that gradually have acquired a fundamentalist tonality. Four fundamentalisms can be located. Religious fundamentalism is the most obvious, with islamist neo-fundamentalism and Christian pro life activism as its most explosive appearances. Reli-fundamentalism has always been countered by reason. But in denying its own auto immune impact on society, reason's counter attack can easily turn into Enlightenment fundamentalism. Once her crucial values - freedom and autonomy - are reinterpreted in economic terms and reduced to one single value - market value - yet another fundamentalism enters the game: market fundamentalism. Individual's autonomy and freedom become functions of free market mechanisms. But the most invisible, yet nearly omnipresent fundamentalism reduces both man and market - the selfish self or 'autos' - on mobile vectors. With auto mobility becoming nearly a constitutional right the most illustrious of all fundamentalism comes to the fore: auto fundamentalism.

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2 The Geopolitical and globalisation

"There are two kinds of people", Blondie says to the Ugly after their first enterprise - delivering the Ugly, collecting the dough, shooting the rope and in doing this raising the bounty, "those that get a rope around their neck and those that shoot the rope". After being discarded and left behind in the desert, the Ugly traces Blondie and

corners him in a hotel room. Blondie shoots the Ugly's companions but forgets his cunning anticipation. The Ugly forces Blondie to put a noose around his own neck and retorts: "There are two kinds of spurs: those that come through the door and those that come through the window". Finally on the graveyard Blondie overtrumps the Ugly by taking him by surprise. "There are two kinds of people", he once more states, "those with a loaded gun and those that dig". It is either us or them. They will be hunted down in their caves. Meanwhile what we have to do in order for the system not to collapse as the Twin Towers did, we have to keep on shopping, Bush assures his fellow Americans.

So we are the Good, they are the Bad. When the twain meet each other the result is an Ugly scene. Abu Graib, Hathida, as once was Mi Lai. So does the Ugly throw some light on this ambiguity? He or she does. One does not stare at the Ugly. The Ugly always is receptive, restraint, or aggressive and pompous in its proactive defence. Since 2001 it has once more evident whose on the right side and who on the wrong. Who is the Good and who is the Bad? But who is the Ugly? Or more to the point: Why also the Ugly? Ugly is an aesthetic category, the Good and the Bad moral ones. Is it possible to value them on the same qualitative level: the Good, the Bad – we are still listening – and the Ugly. And the Ugly, the Ugly combining the Good and the Bad. Bad because it is distaste and as such resonates not as much stupidity as laziness. Pro activity might be beyond, but interactivity suffices. Not to do any effort to receive, to wait. Or in a less depressing mode: just to be interested.

3 ICTheology

The Ugly is a media effect. Is the aerobombing of the Twin Towers an ugly sight? On the contrary, it is fascinating, absorbing. Stockhausen lost his head and was called to place by the

Is politics the hostage of art? If the thesis that society is aestheticized due to digitalisation is plausible, than the domain of art is at least porous, but probably worse: it is fragmented, foamed, to phrase in serological terms.

In the final instance the Good and the Ugly share a secret: the grave of the Unknown. The Ugly has no notion of this double talk. Arch Stanton is his aim.

4 More ugly than ugly: the Monstrous

Allow me a shift in tone and tension. I will take a side track to the philosophies of Jean Baudrillard and Peter Sloterdijk. On the first page of his *Fatal Strategies* he discharges dialectics for taking care of reality. The optimistic preview of sublation (Aufhebung) has long gone. After Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* Derrida *cum suis* finished the job. For Baudrillard sublation has become critical itself, partly metastasis, partly hypocritical. Excess instead of sublation. Excess as the explosion of energy. And its effort to check the process, foster the targets, the dynamical forces accelerate, becoming ever complex, eventually taking over the impetus in favour of themselves, triggering a vicious circle that chokes the system.

In the excess, in this urge no longer to reinvest all energy into your own system, but to open and dissipate the system in thrusting forward, the speeding up adrenaline levels, in this excess there is no longer any measure. More ugly than ugly, Baudrillard writes, more ugly than ugly is monstrous. More beautiful than beautiful is mode. Every force is motivated by its own intensification, satisfaction to the point of the loss of control

and finally self loss. In this hyperreality, Baudrillard states, in this reality that is more real than real, there is no place for dichotomous, in spite of the contorted efforts of the old system to reproduce them time and again.

More ugly than ugly, that is the monstrous, says Baudrillard in *Fatal strategies*. And according to Peter Sloterdijk – reminding us of Heidegger’s Uncanny – the monstrous is what we cannot get a grip on. It is the world in so far it does not allow mediation.

The nexus of the film is a cart racing out of the desert when Blondie is about to perish. Bill Carson is one of the dying soldiers in the cart. Barely alive he tries to persuade the Ugly to give him water in exchange for a secret: the place where 200.000 dollars are buried. The Ugly runs for water, but when he comes back it is the dying Good to whom the word is passed. The issue is: is their a secret? What is the name on the bottom of the stone? What is the noose around our necks?

6 Circulus vitiosus: death by hanging

The circulus vitiosus of fundamentalism. The choking circle of fundamental counter-reference, facilitated by ever accelerating IT processes and unbridled media exposure. The consolidation of power is crucial though it can legitimize itself by being representatives of those who lack power. Can one lack power? Is this the psychosomatic effect of frustrated proactivity? Lacking power presupposes anticipation. Or on the most basic level, its ultimate expression: the will to survive. Act. Do something! We have the urge, but we cannot. But this is he opposite of excess. Is it the opposite? No, its supplement. Lack of power is always supplemented by urge to excess. To the extreme, to what no longer has any measure but its own impetus. No other value than itself. Sovereignty. Self mediation. God. “Blondie, you son of a

[Fragment GBU: final shot noose 248.28]

THE END