

# The Face of Evil. From the “Banality of Evil” and the “Falsification of the Good” to the Falsification of Freedom\*

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*Whoever says that man is born to freedom utters a sentence that has no meaning.*  
(Joseph de Maistre)

## Abstract

*Decoded in the hermeneutic key of such syntagms as “banality of evil” and “falsification of the good”, twentieth-century totalitarianisms display their true power of moral destruction. The analyses of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Alain Besançon are two ways of understanding human nature subject to the aggression of moral violence, whose primary consequence is the annulment of the freedom of action and, even more seriously, of conscience. Projecting, retrospectively, the violent lesson of the twentieth century on the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevsky’s prophetism, construed in its anthropologic dimension, may round off the perspective on totalitarian thinking, which, despite having been presented as Humanism, had the falsification of freedom as its main objective. It is what I aim to illustrate in this paper, with the conviction that any undertaking of this nature is, in the present-day context, necessary for becoming aware of the need for continual spiritual resignification of the wounds that the totalitarian ideologies and global crises leave on the body of humankind, consuming from its very fundamentals.*

**Keywords:** “banality of evil”, “falsification of the good”, falsification of freedom, totalitarianism, the face of evil.

## *The face of evil in its “banality”*

Not all consequences that result from Hannah Arendt’s theory illustrated in the syntagm “banality of evil” have been fully formulated. In this respect, perhaps the interview she gave to Joachim Fest in 1964 (Arendt, 2013) sheds light and resumes her thesis from *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*

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(1963/2008), in which she analyses a human typology specific to totalitarian regimes. The thesis of the banality of evil asserts that Eichmann was neither a fanatic nor a sociopath but a usual and banal person, who justified his actions based on clichés rather than his own thinking and was motivated by the ethics of duty rather than ideology. The banality refers to his actions being motivated by his status as a clerk in a bureaucratic system: he obeyed orders in an unexceptional manner out of complacency. The themes of responsibility and justification of the decision to remain a part of the organization and functioning of the criminal system are encoded by Arendt in a laconic yet suggestive answer: “Those who did go along always justified themselves the same way, as we can see. They always said, “We only stayed on so that things wouldn’t get any worse.” Right? But, well – this justification should be rejected once and for all – it couldn’t have got any worse.” (Arendt, 2013, p. 45) Arendt also clarifies the theme of complicity and degrees of guilt, mentioning the matter of weakness in a totalitarian system. The crime, even in the machine of the bureaucratic system, is understood as an action mode that many people like Eichmann accepted and practiced. Just as many, perhaps even more, saw themselves unably weak in the isolation imposed at a mass level by the system. Arendt considers that “there was no possibility of resisting, since they were all isolated, since they didn’t belong together anywhere, since not even a dozen people could get together, as it were, and trust one another” (Arendt, 2013, p. 46). This perspective on the phenomenon of weakness is related to the way in which she understands the nature of politics as a space of freedom, on the one hand, where people freely express their opinions, and as an agreement with oneself, on the other hand, for fear of the conflict with the self. In the typology of Eichmann, who justified his participation in the crime administration through the ethics of duty (*I was sitting at my desk, doing my job*), Arendt notices the elimination of the person from the very intimacy of self-dialogue, thus annulling the conscience of responsibility, which only occurs when one thinks about what one is doing. Eichmann is not a typical criminal, he does not kill out of passion, and he has no personal agenda: he kills from a safe distance, as a cog in the machine – which actually makes him infinitely eviller, “an incomparably more fearsome type of person than any ordinary murderer” (Arendt, 2013, p. 49).

I will not dwell on the commentary on Arendt’s “banality of evil.” However, worth mentioning is the methodological principle by virtue of which we should understand this thesis that has sprung so much controversy. We cannot read *Eichmann in Jerusalem* separated from the rest of her oeuvre as if there had been two conceptions – a strictly ethical and a strictly political one. On the contrary, the

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two views must be regarded in complementarity, each highlighting the subtleties of the other.

This principle also integrates Hannah Arendt’s doctoral dissertation on Augustine in the unity of her oeuvre. Augustine’s model, *caritas – cupiditas*, transferred to Eichmann’s case, explains “the paradox of evil which is not radical but pedestrian, bourgeois, and seemingly rooted in everydayness” (Arendt, 1996, p. 120). In the commenters’ view, the Augustinian take on evil – *cupiditas* – is the point where Arendt may have returned to for expanding the analysis on the banality of evil. For Augustine, *appetitus* is the connection of the individual with reality. It has two forms of manifestation, *caritas* (which ensures the rebuilding of the world based on shared values) and *cupiditas* (by which the world manifests as materiality and strength). For Arendt, *cupiditas* manifests in human nature as a habit that gives man the sentiment of belonging to the world, preventing him from remembering the true source of his being. *Cupiditas* is the wilful slippage of the spirit under the rule of habit, which has become “second nature” (Arendt, 1996, p. 82). Eichmann seems to embody the human type fallen under *cupiditas* construed as a habit that cancels moral judgment: “Augustine’s paradigm of immobilized will entrapped in habituated worldliness could perhaps be applied to Eichmann, the routinely civilized bureaucrat incapable of the critical distance necessary for moral judgment” (Arendt, 1996, pp. 120-1). We thus see that the annulment of moral judgment must be placed in relation to the misappropriation of Kantian moral philosophy that Eichmann appeals to during the trial, asserting that he has abided by the principles of Kantian moral all his life and made the ethics of duty the rule for his actions: “Capitulating to the world of *das Man* or the “they”, and using philosophy as an instrumental justification, was clearly a subversion of moral reasoning and, significantly, a corruption of Kant’s philosophy” (Arendt, 1996, p. 191).

*Totalitarianisms*

If we look at the twentieth century from the other side, that of communist totalitarianism, we probably cannot identify an event as important as Eichmann’s trial to help us make sense of the nature of the ideology that enthralled Eastern Europe for half a century. Perhaps, still in the ethical mode, but at the opposite end of an imaginary measurement, the extreme act of Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square on January 16, 1969, to protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, could be a similarly significant event, if we take into account the confession of Jaroslava Maserova, who asserts that,

*It was not so much in opposition to the Soviet occupation, but the demoralization that was setting in, that people were not only giving up but giving in. And he wanted to stop that demoralization. I think the people in the street, the multitude of people in the street, silent, with sad eyes, serious faces, which when you looked at those people you understood that everyone understands, all the decent people who were on the verge of making compromises. (Radio Prague International, online)*

The demoralization Maserova associates with Palach's act has, I think, much more profound meaning in the context of the way in which the totalitarian regimes (nazism and communism) understood to exercise their power. It is also Arendt who notes, in her monumental *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the brand-new mechanism which sets the foundation of what we can decode as *de*-moralization, in the sense of depriving of the fundamentals of the ethics on which laws have been constituted in the traditional governing systems: totalitarian ideologies alter the meaning of the term "law", in that if it "changed its meaning: from expressing the framework of stability within which human actions and motions can take place, it became the expression of the motion itself." (Arendt, 1962, p. 464). The Law – of Nature, in the case of nazism, and of History, in the case of communism – by which totalitarian regimes assume and exercise power, is the law of killing and is effected through terror, whose purpose is the manufacturing of *new man*, of a new human genus, a purpose for which the individual is sacrificed in the name of the species. The mechanism that the two totalitarian ideologies trigger with a view to rewriting the new code in the gene of humanity is described with microscopic preciseness:

*Terror is the realization of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action. As such, terror seeks to "stabilize" men in order to liberate the forces of nature or history. It is this movement which singles out the foes of mankind against whom terror is let loose, and no free action of either opposition or sympathy can be permitted to interfere with the elimination of the "objective enemy" of History or Nature, of the class or the race. Guilt and innocence become senseless notions; "guilty" is he who stands in the way of the natural or historical process which has passed judgment over "inferior races," over individuals "unfit to live," over "dying classes and decadent peoples." Terror executes these judgments, and before its court, all concerned are subjectively innocent: the murdered because they did nothing against the system, and the murderers because they do not really murder but execute a death sentence pronounced by some higher tribunal. The rulers themselves do not claim to be just or wise, but only to execute historical or natural laws; they do not apply laws, but execute a movement in accordance with its inherent law. Terror is lawfulness, if law is the law of the movement of some suprahuman force, Nature or History. (Arendt, 1962, p. 465)*

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Arendt’s intuitions, outlined in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and included in the theory on the banality of evil, can be related to those of Alain Besançon who, in a dialogue with Marius Stan and Vladimir Tismăneanu (contributors.ro), asserted that, far from the idea that the problem of totalitarianism is the abolition of the distinction between good and evil, it resides in the falsification of the good, which consists in “taking courageous, devoted, well-oriented individuals and making them commit crimes with a clear conscience, without even being aware that they are criminals.” What Arendt designated by elimination of the person from the intimacy of self-dialogue, for Besançon, is the distancing of the consciousness of doing evil that the criminal assumes as an effect of the moral destruction whose instrument is this falsification of the good (Besançon, 2007, p. 40). What Arendt expressed with the idea that total terror, as the essence of totalitarian regimes, is a band of iron that holds individuals “so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions” (Arendt, 1962, pp. 465-6) – an abstract entity that embodies in history the idea of *new man*, Alain Besançon places “outside the human as if we had been faced with a negative transcendence” (Besançon, 2007, p. 40), assimilated with the idea of demonical. At the end of the day, man’s annihilation as a person and the imposition of an ideological abstraction on humankind opens, in the history of the twentieth century, the path of radical evil through the totalitarian regimes that Leszek Koakowski characterized with the formula “the Devil embodied in History”, a century whose meaning cannot be understood “if we do not acknowledge the uniqueness of the revolutionary left and right experiments in reshaping the human condition in the name of presumably inexorable historical laws.” (Tismăneanu, 2012, p. 18)

In what the relation to Nature and History is concerned, the ethics of nazism has at its core the idea that the good consists in “the restoration of a natural order corrupted by history” (Besançon, 2007, p. 40), and this task is encoded in the fate of the white race. In the case of communism, nature is the environment in which man is fulfilled and will be perfected under the strength of historical dramatic progress because “dialectical and historical materialism ensures the unity of nature and history” (Besançon, 2007, pp. 48-49) and justifies the destruction of the old order, understood as a sacrifice that generates the new (Besançon, 2007, p. 50).

*The face of evil in the “falsification of the good”*

Besançon’s thesis is that the falsification of the good is more profound in communism than in nazism because the moral split between crime and good is

much more diffuse than in the case of nazism. The left-wing ideological lie establishes a continuity between the traditional and the new ethics, which, for a large number of adepts, will never be challenged – this gives birth to the argument of those who consider that, despite its numerous crimes, communism is still frequentable. Moreover, the lie must be continual because, once capitalism is eliminated, socialism is delayed. Against this background, moral destruction is almost complete: “a universe of counterfeits meant to substitute the true one. Thus, an atmosphere of generalized lies builds up whilst the facts move away from the words that have to describe them. The good asserts itself frantically to deny the reality of evil.” (Besançon, 2007, p. 57)

What Besançon terms *pedagogy of lies* is rebuilt in the following architecture: the party is at the center and, under the commands of ideology, must eliminate the class enemy – in the name of utopia, the moral conscience is intoxicated to accept the destruction of several categories of people; when it is noted that the “ritual decimation” has not met its aims, a step further is taken from utopia to the preservation of power and a second terror is unleashed, whose aim is to fully control people’s lives and minds (“everyone informs against everyone; everyone betrays serially”); at the third stage, that of safeguarding against the eternal purging, the party “is content with the routine management of its power and security. It no longer believes in ideology but continues to speak its language and makes sure that this language, which it knows to be mendacious, is the only one used because it represents the sign of its dominance. It accumulates privileges and benefits. It turns into a caste. It enters generalized corruption.” (Besançon, 2007, p. 58)

In this architecture of the totalitarian system, the pedagogy of lies, accurately described by Besançon, is applied to the whole population that is threatened, exposed to lies, and required to participate in crime. The methods of implementing this pedagogy are:

1. *border closing* – besides the need to conceal crimes, the entire society is a school in which education means replacing capitalist values with socialist ones;

2. *information control* – what happens outside and inside should not be known; history must be rewritten. Orwell synthesized this idea in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past.”

3. *imposing a pseudo-reality* with the help of “a body specialized in falsification” (journalists, historians, writers, artists, economists); a follow-up to the second method, this one sets the lie as truth and introduces it in history. It is also a practice described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where Orwell shows how

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propaganda needed an endless series of victories over memory, in fact, just another name for *reality control* or *doublethink*. (Orwell, 2020)

With a profound intuition, Besançon synthesises an anthropological view that constitutes the foundation of the pedagogy of lies:

*The construction of this huge set occupies millions of people. What is it for? To show that socialism is not only possible, but that it is on the way to becoming a reality, to being consolidated or, moreover, that it has already been achieved: that there is a new, free, self-regulated society, where “new men” grow up, thinking and acting spontaneously according to the canons of reality-fiction. The most powerful instrument of power is the creation of a new language in which words take on a meaning different from the usual one. Its diction and special vocabulary give it the value of a liturgical language: it denotes the transcendence of socialism. It signals the omnipotence of the party. Its use by the people is the immediately visible mark of their subservience. (Besançon, 2007, p. 59)*

To put it otherwise, this is the description of a huge Potemkin village in which *doublethink* means *to deliberately believe the lie to be true*. Besançon analyses the consequences of the *pedagogy of lies*, identifying at first the bona fide that accepts the crime as punishment against the enemies of the happiness promised by socialism, but results in *moral brutalization and loss of intellectual terms of reference*; then, *shame and moral abjection, obedience* out of fear of the ceremonies that approve the sentencing; the last stage is *desperation and self-loathing*; *doublethink* is abandoned and people prefer to stop thinking – they become irresponsible, lazy and passive (Besançon, 2007, pp. 59-61). No one can escape the pedagogy of lies, moral destruction is complete, and architecture and mechanisms are totalitarian. What Eichmann’s trial had shown at the heart of Europe was to be known in the communist concentration camps for a longer period of time and dig deeper into the body politic of societies. This is precisely why the history of the twentieth century enables Besançon to claim:

*The communist idea had perverted the principle of reality and the moral principle to such an extent that it could indeed survive the 85 million bodies, while the nazi idea had collapsed under the burden of its victims. Thinking that he was talking like an honest, idealist, and intransigent man, he had uttered a monstrous sentence. Communism is more perverse than nazism because it does not require man to consciously take the moral step of the criminal and uses the spirit of justice and goodness present throughout the globe to spread evil everywhere. Each communist experience begins in innocence. (Besançon, 2007, p. 64)*

*Dostoevsky's prophecy – the face of evil and the strangling of freedom*

Commenting on *A Short Story on Antichrist*, Fedotov observes that Solovyov's Antichrist is a spiritualist and a righteous austere, animated by social ethics of charity, whose aim is "the instauration of peace on earth and the general equality of the satiated" (Fedotov, 2000, p. 86, our translation from the Romanian version). In Fedotov's opinion, Solovyov's Antichrist does not fully belong to the ecclesiastic tradition, but the essence of his nature remains the same: under the face of righteousness, haughtiness and the lack of love are hidden, traits that will eventually reveal the face of the hideous tyrant. This is the reason why Fedotov's key of interpretation reveals the prophetic nature of Solovyov's *Short Story* from the historical perspective of the twentieth-century Russian political struggle and of the totalitarian nature of Russian Marxism. Considering that communism is the ultimate expression of the Antichristic attack, Fedotov stresses the idea that, more than the so-called Humanism, Russian Marxism "does not tempt by way of compassion and not even by way of equity (...) but by meeting one's interests: not with the good but with the goods and – subconsciously, but at its vital core – with the pleasure for revenge and the pathos of class hatred" (Fedotov, 2000, p. 95). This dissociation shows, on the one hand, the hate for the ethical foundation of its purposes and the anti-humanistic and anti-ethical nature of communism, and, on the other hand, the fact that the fate of such an ideology originates and is fulfilled in dictatorship and violence.

Fedotov remarks that serving the good is just the form in which the Antichrist fulfills his action – Solovyov himself prefaces the *Short Story* with the text "On the falsification of the good," in which he confesses the will to show that the shiny cover of the good and truth is just a deceiving mask under which the darkness of evil is hidden (Solovyov, 1992, p. 31).

The *Short Story*, which is considered a match to *The Grand Inquisitor* (Solovyov, 1992, p. 18), is undoubtedly a journey into the empire of evil. But Dostoevsky's allegory stresses the falsification of the good more subtly because, on the one hand, the Antichrist assumes the face of the ascetic – "a withered face and sunken eyes" (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 287) and, on the other hand, there is an incompatible tension between freedom and happiness. The ascetic face endows him with authority in front of the masses. He wears a monk frock made of rough fabric and scans the crowds from afar, a crowd that is used to submit to him without comments – the people's habit of stepping aside and worshipping him describes the same type of human behavior that belongs to the *cupiditas* area of human nature understood as *habit* (Arendt). Through habits, the individual feels



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that he belongs to a crowd that represents the false body politic, invested with false decision-making power since they have given up their liberty and accepted the authority of leaders. This is why, with Dostoevsky, *the falsification of the good is related to the theme of freedom – the central theme of the Grand Inquisitor story*. The Inquisitor knows the psychology of the crowd, which should not be disturbed by reassessing the theme of freedom; the crowd, with its condition as a subject to authority, needs “one wave of [his] hand to rush to rake up the embers on your bonfire, do you know that?” (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 287). By way of consequence, the scaffolding of the Grand Inquisitor, on whose basis Jesus Christ is accused and sentenced, rests on the *falsification of the idea of freedom*: on the first coming, the Messiah confessed to the freedom of the human being, and now the Grand Inquisitor no longer gives Him the right to confess or add anything else, nor to take away from the people the freedom for which He fought tooth and nail. We gather that two perspectives on human nature are being opposed here; Christ cannot speak to defend His teachings on man’s absolute freedom, while the Inquisitor is speculating the nature of faith itself – its freedom must be defended/preserved by eliminating the miracle from people’s lives. Thus, the weakness of the freedom of faith has opened the path to its falsification:

*Was it not you who so often used to say back then: “I want to make you free”? Well, but now you have seen those “free” people,” the old man suddenly adds with a thoughtful and ironic smile. “Yes, this task has cost us dearly,” he continues, looking at him sternly, “but we have at last accomplished it in your name.” (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 288)*

This mission consisted of the falsification and strangling of freedom as, in the Inquisitor’s view, man is mutinous by nature, and mutineers cannot be happy. Therefore, in order to be happy, men, convinced that they were free, had to be determined to get rid of this burden of absolute freedom: “They themselves have brought us their freedom and have laid it humbly at our feet. But we were the ones who did that.” (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 289) It is obvious that this is not the freedom affirmed by Jesus, but the old man is certain that he has the merit of having strangled freedom and sacrificed it for men’s happiness.

The architecture of falsification is made up by misconstruing the three questions Christ was asked in the episode of the temptation in the desert. The assault on freedom is carried out through:

1. *the temptation of miracle*:

*You want to go into the world and are going there with empty hands, with a kind of promise of freedom which they in their simplicity and inborn turpitude are*

*unable even to comprehend, which they go in fear and awe of – for nothing has ever been more unendurable to man and human society than freedom! Look, you see those stones in that naked, burning hot wilderness? Turn them into loaves and mankind will go trotting after you like a flock, grateful and obedient, though ever fearful that you may take away your hand and that your loaves may cease to come their way. (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 290)*

2. *the temptation of mystery*: on the edge of the temple and urged to throw himself into the void, the tempter staked the freedom of Jesus' trust in the Father and the very freedom of the Father, so that the Son might prove His divinity or, in other words, the exceptional character of which, from the Inquisitor's perspective, men, in their ineptitude and mutiny, are not capable.

3. *the temptation of authority* lies in the recognition that men need a master whom they can worship, entrusting their consciences to in the name of the undivided unity of the human race, of a universal kingdom, and the pacification of the earth.

Throughout the development of this architecture of falsification, man is described as depraved and stubborn, weak and infamous, a weak-spirited slave always willing to know to whom must he renounce his freedom and submit, prone to worshiping gods or, in their absence, idols. For this man, freedom is his currency for a clear conscience, and the one who succeeds in this will gain control over human freedom itself, insomuch as the individual is capable of giving up his own bread to follow the one who has managed to enthrall his spirit. The ones who share the Inquisitor's view downgrade human nature to what is depicted as the mystery of freedom that few can master and in which few truly believe:

*Peace of mind and even death are dearer to man than free choice and the cognition of good and evil. There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting for him, either! (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 293)*

Only now, the three temptations balanced against the mystery of freedom reveal their subtle nature, able to falsify the essence of freedom:

*There are three powers, only three powers on the earth that are capable of eternally vanquishing and ensnaring the consciences of those feeble mutineers, for their happiness – those powers are: miracle, mystery, and authority. You rejected the first, the second, and the third, and yourself gave the lead in doing so. (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 293)*

Towards the end, the Inquisitor assesses what followed after the first coming of Jesus, describing world history through two types of conflict – one between the mystery of human nature governed by the three forces and the mystery of freedom, and the other, between the promise of real, earthly loaves of bread and heavenly

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nourishment. He also evaluates the consequences of Christ’s sacrifice, which only resulted in unrest, trouble, and unhappiness, after all the suffering Jesus endured in the name of men’s freedom, which justifies the fight against freedom in history.

The course of history has been set during the temptation in the desert, but rejecting the three temptations, Jesus also rejected the foundation of the world empire under His scepter and the completion of peace. Consequently, the task of this project that has been assigned to those who denied Him may be fulfilled by those who offer people loaves of bread and control their spirits.

Demystifying and minimizing the heart’s freedom to choose between good and evil, the Inquisitor replaces it with obedience, against one’s conscience, in the wish to correct the Messiah’s work in the world. The foundation of faith in the Christic sacrifice is opposed, in the mission for humanity, by the three forces – the temptations of miracle, mystery, and authority – which themselves become the concealed purpose of Jesus’ sacrifice – here lies, in fact, the essence of the falsification of freedom.

*They are depraved and mutineers, but in the end, they too will grow obedient. They will marvel at us and will consider us gods because we, in standing at their head, have consented to endure freedom and rule over them – so terrible will being free appear to them at last! But we shall say that we are obedient to you and that we rule in your name. We shall deceive them again, for we shall not let you near us anymore.* (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 292)

The accomplishment of the mission of falsification of freedom is placed by Dostoevsky towards the end of the monologue – an accusation worthy of the well-known Stalinist political trials, a utopian prophecy of the propagandistic description of a perfect society, in which happiness won over freedom:

*In our hands, though, everyone will be happy and will neither mutiny nor destroy one another anymore, as they do in your freedom, wherever one turns. Oh, we shall persuade them that they will only become free when they renounce their freedom for us and submit to us.* (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 297)

Projecting the violent lesson of the twentieth century over the legend of the Grand Inquisitor retrospectively, Dostoevsky’s prophetic should be construed in its anthropologic dimension. The collective character of the class enemy that communist ideology identified as a scapegoat that needs to be sacrificed by the laws of history is personified by Jesus in *The Grand Inquisitor*. He is the threat, the external aggression to an order that acts against freedom. In Derrida’s terms, “the character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat. The *evil* and the *outside*, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the

city – these are the two major senses of the character and of the ritual.” (Derrida, 1997, p. 130)

The reason why Jesus must be sacrificed is that, if he comes back among people, He can remind them (*anamnesis*) of the essence of freedom, now estranged from the “body politic” that is going to violently expulse Him out of the city. Moreover, the second sentencing of Jesus becomes the anticipative symbol of the collective violence that communist totalitarian ideology was going to justify in the name of the falsified values of the good and freedom.

### *Conclusions*

Isaiah Berlin noted that Joseph de Maistre expressed in his theses “truths unpalatable to his contemporaries, indignantly denied by his successors, and recognized only in our own day” because the “order which Maistre regarded as the only remedy against the dissolution of the social fabric came into being, in our own time, in its most hideous form” (Berlin, 2013, p. 177). In the spirit of Maistre, Dostoevsky’s Inquisitor admits that man is an unfortunate being who comes into the world with the gift of freedom, but his greatest concern is to place this torturous burden into someone else’s hands. The totalitarian regimes understood the fact that freedom is a gift that may subvert the oppression system but also a weakness that can be annexed, falsified, and turned into a tool of terror. This is why the task of terror is to “eliminate from the process not only freedom in any specific sense but the very source of freedom which is given with the fact of the birth of man and resides in his capacity to make new beginnings.” (Arendt, 1962, p. 466), so that, under the justification of the laws of Nature or History, totalitarian terror eliminates races and classes to accelerate its processes. Under the nazi criminal bureaucracy and the lie added to the crime promoted by communist ideology, thought is crippled and freedom is annihilated – the banality of evil and the falsification of the good are two faces of the same radical evil prophesied by Dostoevsky.

After the twentieth-century experiments, freedom has become the only truly foundational value for humanity and political life. The two totalitarian systems that justified mass murder have revealed, for the first time, the value of human freedom as a foundation of social and individual life. This is the lesson of the twentieth century, a lesson from those who died in concentration camps and the Gulag, a lesson that we need to recall every time when the present is threatened by the dark specters of the last century.

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Once again, Hannah Arendt’s and Alain Besançon’s intuitions are topical. The Grand Inquisitor’s prophecy that “centuries will pass, and mankind will proclaim with the lips of its wisdom and science that there is no crime and consequently no sin either, but only the hungry” (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 292) should be read through the prism of the analyses of the two and construed as a warning against the degree of moral degradation that humankind may reach under the influence of propaganda and lies, inasmuch as not only can it no longer tell the good from evil but also, to their detriment, these values can be canceled in the name of others, deemed superior, which justify the crime.

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