

How to Flourish in Dark Times: Ety Hillesum, the Loving Heart of the Barracks

Primavera Fisogni

PhD, in Metaphysics, a journalist at La Provincia di Como newspaper Italy

ABSTRACT

After the pandemic outbreak, the war due to the aggression of Ukraine by Russia had the consequence to darken the global scenario. New and old fears, especially the terror linked to nuclear weapons, shocked the entire world as never happened since the Nazi regime and the tragedy of the the II World War. Within this frame, two questions especially arise. The first refers to the limits of evildoing; the second is about the capacity to live a good life despite everything. My paper is aimed at sketching an answer to the second problem, through the life experience of Ety Hillesum, a woman who taught us how to flourish amid the Nazi hell. More than ever in the past decades, her meditations resound as highly valuable to explore the limits of evildoing and, above all, the unlimited power of goodness. What makes Ety's story particularly relevant, from a psychological and a philosophical perspective, is its phenomenological texture. In other words, she had a sharp intuition of how the good can drive people also in dark times when it seems that evil is winning the battle on the front line.

Key words: evil, good, concentration camps, Nazi regime, sensing, love, human agency, conduct, ethics.

A CASE STUDY ABOUT THE POWER OF THE GOOD

Ety Hillesum died in Auschwitz at the age of 29 in 1943, after having spent more than a year at Westerbork, a transit camp of the Nazi regime located near Amsterdam, in the occupied Netherlands. Her writings, the *Diary* and the *Letters* (1, 2), witness an uncommon point of view on reality, in the light of pain and suffering: she did not condemn her persecutors and she was able to find some highly positive aspects of life also in the abyss of degradation. For this uncommon attitude, scholars generally agree that Hillesum's approach to life was a kind of contemporary mystic. This paper, focused on some achievements of my doctoral dissertation (3), is aimed at sketching a new interpretation of Hillesum's thought, as a peculiar metaphysical attitude that reevaluates the role of sensing in the human agency. Only moving from this philosophical perspective, rooted in the classical thought of Thomas Aquinas and refreshed by German phenomenologists, the extraordinary life of Ety may be fully understood (4). She

was not a professional philosopher, but a sensitive thinker with a peculiar native phenomenological attitude.

Hillesum made the experience of good in the darkest years of the 20th Century. She could flourish, as a person, amid the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis. Her writings provide us with a deep account of the origin of evildoing as a lack of being, a sort of intimate dryness of the person. Life in the concentration camp offers itself as a case report of how the lack of sensing gives rise to the loss of identity, which reverberates on human agency.

I argue that Hillesum's understanding of evildoers goes further the classical perspective of Hannah Arendt (5) or Zygmunt Baumann (6), who considered the Nazi agents as the result of a 'routine process' of brainwashing. In restoring consistency to the classical notion of evildoing as loss of being – specially formulated by Agustin, and Thomas Aquinas–, Hillesum gave a new breath to the very idea of love as the native experience of good. Precisely, by recognizing the positive of life, despite the dehumanization she experienced in the Nazi camp, Ety

Address for correspondence:

Primavera Fisogni, PhD, in Metaphysics, a journalist at La Provincia di Como newspaper, Italy.

DOI: 10.33309/2639-9113.040204

© 2022 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

made a further step in the cognition of good. The intuition of the ‘positive’, as the main trait of the living world, quickly became for Hillesum an experience of love. It is not for a case that she was able to reach such a spiritual achievement. What continually emerges, from Etty’s witness, is her remarkable capacity to feel the warmth of empathy by focusing all her cognitive and emotional efforts on sensing. I consider her experience at Westerbork deeply fruitful, from a theoretical perspective, to investigate the link between intimate dryness and spiritual impoverishment. An experience that Etty turned to good by grasping fully the positive essence of life. Furthermore, she opened up herself to the other creatures and the Creator, not just to move forward pain, but in consideration of a particular insight concerning the resilience of the whole person. This is what I intend to argue after having focused on Hillesum’s experience at Westerbork.

A YOUNG WOMAN IN THE NAZI ERA

We know, from Etty herself, that she was voluntarily confined in Westerbork as a secretary of the Dutch Jewish Council. What makes her witness especially relevant is the sharp understanding of the phenomenon of dehumanization (7). Nevertheless, her *Diary* and *Letters* deeply differ from other accounts of life in the Nazi extermination camps (4), because she was able to feel the positive of life amid the atrocities. I could go further by saying that Etty flourished, as a person and as an original thinker, in that land of dehumanization. A surprisingly native phenomenological approach to the problem of evil brought Hillesum not to condemn her persecutors. She realized that their behaviour was the consequence of a highly weakened sensing. Through her sensitive approach, she defended the possibility, for human beings, to live a good life also when evil seems to limit the person, both physically and spiritually.

Moving from these premises, we understand why, for decades, Hillesum’s thought has been neglected for the difficulty to frame it into traditional paradigms. Incredibly, the publication of her writings was ‘a protracted affair’ (8): only in 1981 a selection of her *Diary* was printed in Holland, immediately becoming a best-seller worldwide. Etty’s genuine effort to understand the evildoers was probably at the origin of the scholars’ intellectual discomfort, who did not take into consideration her works until recent years, having the consequence to marginalize her original philosophical thought (9, 10). Hillesum experimented in her short life what classical philosophy has only conceptualized at large: the relation between reality and good and, on the opposite, the relation between loss of reality and evil.

What does it make Etty’s life at Westerbork so peculiar? I come back to her words: Hillesum was surprised that life was “meaningful and beautiful (...) despite everything”. Indeed, it

not the religious faith (although the ‘great exchange’ she had with God; August 1942, 18th), nor a peculiar attitude to suffer, made of her an outstanding witness of her age. She was also perfectly aware of what was happening all around her when she wrote that “(...) life is meaningful and beauty. Minute by minute” (July 1942, 3rd). (8)

Etty opened herself up to the others with a generosity that only from a superficial point of view could be seen as a consequence of being a victim. Nothing, in her behaviour or writings, made her profile comparable to the existential category of the ‘pariahs’, described by Hannah Arendt as the condition of ‘repressed and persecuted’ who find, in dark times, a peculiar brotherhood. Etty was immersed in a conscious, phenomenologically acquired experience of goddess, as her words witness: “It is also a source of vitality, a joy in the simple fact of being alive, rather suggesting that life comes fully into its own only among those who are (...) the insulted and injured” (10).

In Arendt’s perspective, the *pariahs* might convert the darkness of dark times into the “warmth which is the (...) substitute for light” (11), for being compassionate something ‘totally natural’. A completely different nature pertains to Hillesum’s experience, which is not a strategy for minimizing evil. What she achieved from the darkness of the concentration camp was the awareness that personal resources allow the human being to flourish, also in the most severe environmental conditions. How is it possible? What is essential for the human beings to blossom, Hillesum highlights, is not to lose the relation with the world of life, also in the framework of dehumanization.

In the darkest years of 20th century, she applied herself to grasp the positive of life, being fully acquainted with the sense and value of it (July 1943, 5th). She delicately wrote about the colour of flowers on the hut’s window, she was fascinated by the sky, touched by the kindness of the other persons; she imposed herself to perceive something positive also in the persecutors’ cruelty, in the Nazi agents’ behaviour. It was a daily practice of humanity that disclosed to her the truth of being humans. She reached the conclusion that the very essence of people and objects is the ‘positive’ (4). This attitude – that seems, at a first glance, so unusual for ordinary people – shaped Etty’s emotional and moral life. The metaphysical-phenomenological perspective about sensing as a salient source of human flourishing is fully lived by Etty Hillesum. In her *Letters* (August 1943, 11th) he writes: “(...) they say: “You turn just everything into good” (...) Each circumstance, for how painful it is, it is something absolute and has in itself both good and evil”.

It is impossible not to remark, at this point of the paper, the principle of good as given *in re*, in the “thing itself”. In Aquinas’s thought this idea is related to the condition of

the living creatures, their being marked by the goodness of God, the effusive source of being, good, and truth. In this perspective, evil is the deprivation of good and only the human act can decide between the good or evil. Etty suggests a path of resilience when states that: “Against every new and fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness” (July 1943, 3rd).

EVIL AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE LOSS OF BEING

Hillesum’s thought can be compared to a window through which we can catch a rare glimpse of the doctrine of evil as a deprivation of good. Her writings provide a deep account of the origin of evil as a lack of being, a sort of intimate dryness of the person. Both the persecutors and the victims, she frequently noted, were affected by the symptoms of the weakened Self: their conditions were different, of course, and incomparable. However, a common ground of dehumanization seems to belong to the human beings affected by a loss of sensing: the life in Westerbork was, for Etty, the very source of this metaphysical insight. She brought to light three main traits of the loss of being that reflect on the self: all of them take a part in weakening the human agency.

1) Etty experimented, in the barracks, that uniform identity took the place of individual identity. There was not for a veritable interpersonal relation. Here, the moral disorientation could easily start.

2) Perpetrators removed their victims from their sight, by using the tools of bureaucracy and indifference: persons ceased to be men and women, kids or old people for the Nazi agents, who considered them as numbers or a mere list of names. The victims, on the other side, were unable to react. At this level, as Etty discovered, an ontological loss could be found: the weakening of the experience of good, which also affects personal identity.

3) Nothing made sense in Westerbork, because the world of life was deprived of its own sense and value.

Hillesum’s existential lesson underlines that a person can miss his/her humanity in some peculiar circumstances, as it happens, for instance, when somebody is convicted in prison on a camp. On the opposite, Etty’s writing witness her daily effort for grasping the positive of life and, at the same time, her *Letters* and *Diary* show that she was not understood by the other prisoners. She wrote: “My red and yellow roses are fully blossoming. When I was there, in that hell, they have silently continued to bloom. They say: how can you think of flowers, in these times?” (July 1942, 23rd) (1). Nor her best friends, nor those who met in Westerbork, could really see the beauty of flowers as Etty did. In the camp, the prisoners were

desperate; they felt frustrated, disoriented, and alone (12, 13). Etty’s ethical conduct was revealing of a warm attitude to interpersonal relations, without distinction among prisoners and persecutors: for her they were persons, above all.

THE EXPERIENCE OF LOVE THROUGH SENSING

It was not the “call to martyrdom” (8, 9, 20) that properly moved Hillesum to be devoted to the other persons. Moreover, her attitude was the consequence of Etty’s capacity to go deeper into the positive side of reality. The more Etty loved, the more she let her inner ground – either spiritual and emotional – being touched by human suffering (4). This experience of love was not simply originated from the sensitive soul of an outstanding intellectual. In Etty’s writings, we surprisingly face the kind of (practical) knowledge that Thomas Aquinas defined *per connaturalitatem*, a specific inner understanding that moves from the affective relationship with the object (*res*) (14). The extraordinary experience of good made by Hillesum leads us to the intense effort to listen to life that Etty imposed on herself; precisely, the Jewish intellectual calls it a “safe consent to live” (December 1941) (8). The capacity of sensing reality so deeply forged Etty to assume the positive side of ordinary life. Etty equated her heart to a ‘red oven’ from which everything has to pass through to be felt and suffered until the end. No surprise that she described herself as “the thinking heart of the barrack” (October 1942, 3rd). The metaphor outlines a peculiar, sensitive attitude toward reality: the heating of the flames corresponds to her warm involvement with reality. At large, the theme of the heating heart is the main issue in Hillesum’s writings.

In the *Diary* and the *Letters* Etty’s heart suffers and thinks at the same time, in an emotional intricacy. Thus, the image of a ‘red oven’ refers to the idea of flourishing, more than to the hellish annihilation of the holocaust. The exercise of suffering – or expending her own life ‘until the end’ should be taken carefully in consideration to clarify the active component of sensing. Etty’s insight is a philosophical theory deeply rooted in the Aquinas’ doctrine (13).

Sensing, for the medieval philosopher, is not just a passive attitude, a mere perception, but a veritable act that orients will through inclination and intention, in virtue of its capacity of grasping reality. The fine description provided by Hillesum made her aware of experiencing the good through suffering. The practice of sensing also makes Etty acquainted with her own self (“the internal focus that rules my life is getting more and more strong and central”, January 1942, 9th). (1).

Suffering corresponds, in Hillesum’s thought, to the fullness of life. That’s why she invites her friends to follow this path of resilience (“We may suffer, but we must not succumb”, July

1942, 3rd). (1) Nevertheless, she is aware of the difficulty to share such a perspective with the others. The astonishment provided by Hillesum's thought cannot leave anybody indifferent. For some scholars this idea unveils Etty's revolutionary attitude (9). Is love a peculiar experience of good? It is a fact that Hillesum made herself witness for the positive of life beyond all the "quite terrible" misery of the concentration camp (3rd July 1943). Etty discovered, through the lenses of her lived experience, that the darkest events always reveal aspects of fulfilment: it happens because the notion of *positive* is at the very heart of the human condition (something exists rather than nothing) and sufferings is to be placed at the highest degree of sensing. We would not understand her extraordinary heritage if we couldn't take in consideration how the idea of good as an essential trait of reality worked in her psyche since she entered the camp of Westerbork. She naturally moved from despair to joy, from spiritual disease to flourishing, according to the idea that the positive side of reality always prevails, also in the worst environmental conditions.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Hillesum lived a concrete experience of goodness in the midst of the Nazi hell, whose ethical strength continues to throw light on the dark times, as the ones we are currently living. Although she was conscious of the atrocities perpetrated against Hebrew people and perfectly aware of being a victim of the totalitarian evil, nevertheless, she found that a properly human life is lived when the positive of life is sensed, investigated, assumed.

REFERENCES

1. Hillesum H. (1985). *Het verstoorde leven. Dagboek van Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, Bussum The Netherlands, De Haan-Unieboek.
2. Hillesum E. (1986). *Brieven 1942-1943*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans.
3. Fisogni P. (2009). *L'inaridimento dei terroristi*. Roma: Pusc.
4. Fisogni P. (2018). *La profondità del bene. Etty Hillesum e la metafisica della vita buona nei tempi bui*. Città di Castello: LuoghInteriori.
5. Arendt H. (1964). *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the banality of evil*. New York: Viking Press.
6. Bauman Z. (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Oxford, UK: Polity Press.
7. De Monticelli R. (2004). *L'allegria della mente. Dialogando con Agostino*, Milano: Bruno Mondadori, p. 160.
8. van den Brandt R. (2014). *Etty Hillesum. An Introduction to Her Thought*, Wien: Lit Verlag GmbH & Co. KG; p. 16
9. Neri N. (1999). *Un'estrema compassione. E. Hillesum testimone e vittima del Lager*, Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
10. Dobner C. (2007). *E. Hillesum. Pagine mistiche*, Milano: Ancora, p. 135, p. 116
11. Arendt H. (1968). *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Harcourt

Brace Jovanovich, p. 13

12. Arendt H. (1973). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Inc.
13. Granstedt J. (2003). *Ritratto di Etty Hillesum*, Milano: Paoline.
14. D'Avenia M. (1992). *La conoscenza per connaturalità in San Tommaso d'Aquino*. Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano.

How to cite this article: Fisogni P. How to Flourish in Dark Times: Etty Hillesum, the Loving Heart of the Barracks. *Clin Res Psychol* 2022;4(2):19-22.
DOI: 10.33309/2639-9113.040204