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Editorial

Neutrality in Major Social Crises: The Relationship Between Truth, Goodness and Responsibility

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Man is a social being. With the help of reason, he has the ability to distinguish right from wrong (theoretical wisdom) and good from evil (practical wisdom), and with the help of individual and social will and agency, he can choose one of these two sides and base his human action on each. All wars and peace arise from such understanding and action. But it seems that more important than these theoretical and practical positions is something called neutrality. Dante says in the Inferno section of The Divine Comedy: "The hottest place in hell is reserved for those who practice neutrality in times of great moral crises." He says that the darkest part of human psychological life is adopting a neutral position. This sentence by Dante is not simply a literary expression; it expresses a decisive normative judgment about the nature of neutrality in conditions of fundamental conflict.

The first analytical error is to consider neutrality to be "the lack of a position." In fact, neutrality is itself a position, because in any social conflict, the power structure, the consequences, and the distribution of harm persist independently of the individual's choice. Silence or withdrawal stabilizes the balance of power in favor of one side. From the perspective of the ethics of responsibility, every actor who has the power to influence is also responsible for the foreseeable consequences of his or her inaction. Neutrality in a crisis is therefore not only a choice of a particular type of participation, namely passive participation, but also a departure from the field of ethics.

Neutrality cannot be analyzed solely at the theoretical level. Mechanisms such as social conformity, collective pressure, and fear of rejection play a decisive role. Many people remain silent not on the basis of philosophical reflection, but on the basis of social status and personal interests. In this context, neutrality is often a moral formulation of conservatism. The individual justifies silence in the language of rationality in order to maintain his or her security or status. Here, "interest" replaces "truth," and the public good is sacrificed for private good. However, not all impartiality can be condemned. Three types of impartiality must be distinguished.

1) Epistemic impartiality (resulting from genuine doubt and lack of sufficient evidence).

2) Expedient impartiality (resulting from the preference of personal interests over the public good).

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3) Strategic impartiality (temporary refusal to prevent the escalation of a greater evil).

Only the first and third types, and then under strict conditions, can be morally justified. The condition for justification is that impartiality does not lead to a suspension of responsibility and that the individual remains committed to truth-seeking and harm reduction.

The issue raised here is: What is the relationship between impartiality in major social crises and truth, goodness, and responsibility?

Those who answer this question out of wisdom and moral concern will probably say that the type of stance taken in this regard depends on where the truth is. This stance ties us to more important issues: "understanding the truth," "the possibility of understanding the truth," "the criterion of truth," and "truthfulness," and "the possibility of truth-seeking action." These constitute important challenges in this area. But the problem that actually occurs is that the general public and most actors in the field of action do not think about them in detail, and people generally react in accordance with assumptions and beliefs, often based on the social position that arises from their collective behavior in that position. According to the common belief, everyone considers their chosen positions and social position to be right in advance and breathes in its atmosphere. It is this breathing space that legitimizes their actions, behavior, and type of thinking. Perhaps more than anything else, it is "social conformity" and "social facilitation" that fuel their behaviors. It seems that more than truth and truth-seeking, and thought and contemplation in theoretical wisdom, this issue should be sought in the scope and context of practical wisdom and in the subject of "interest." Interest, which has multiple dimensions and sizes and, depending on the priorities and definition and criteria of these priorities, is extensive from the personal to the public sphere and fluctuates from the realm of individuals to the socio-political system.

In the position of theoretical wisdom, we are faced with the issue of "truth," and in practical wisdom, we are faced with the issue of "good and interest." In fact, we are faced with two completely different and even contradictory positions: general truth and general good. Truth is an ontological issue that forms the foundation of existence, and good is a social issue on the basis of which human society and human societies are formed. Not only are these two not the same, but they often seem to disagree on the same position, and it is on this basis that they constantly give each other priority in various and varied positions. This common saying is a product of the same saying, "It is true but not expedient." Saadi's first story in Golestan illustrates this position of strategic neutrality, which is the confrontation of truth and expediency:

I heard the king mention killing a captive. In that state of desperation, the poor man started cursing king and saying abortion, as they have said: whoever is about to die, let him say whatever is in his heart.

Do not run away when it is necessary
Hold the head of the sharp sword
If a person despairs, his tongue becomes long
Like a defeated cat that attacks a dog

"What does he say?" asked King. One of the noble ministers said: "O God! He says: And those who restrain anger and forgive people. King was blessed and forgave him. Another minister who opposed him said: "Our people should not be allowed to speak anything but the truth in the presence of kings. He has insulted and cursed the king." The king turned away from this speech and said: "That lie of his seemed more pleasing to me than the truth that you told, which was based on expediency, and this one was based on malice." And the wise have said: "A lie that is expedient is better than the truth that is seditious."

The truth of a matter and the expediency of affairs are issues that govern human thought and

behavior. In contrast to them are the human positions that are based on and formed by them. Humans, relying on their personal and social issues, develop a tendency towards each. This tendency, more than truth and falsehood or good and evil, fuels a tendency towards love and hate or piety. These are human positions and arise from internal human tendencies that rely on utilitarianism or desirability.

Truth is an ontological and epistemological concept; while good is a normative and social concept. Many moral conflicts arise from the gap between these two areas. A proposition may be “true” but not “expedient.” Saadi’s famous anecdote, in which “an expedient lie is considered more seditious than the truth,” points precisely to this gap. Moral neutrality often takes shape at the intersection of these two domains: one either claims that one has not yet reached the truth and therefore cannot take a stand, or one claims that social interest requires silence.

In any case, interest has a wide range, extending from the individual level to the socio-political structure. But the problem begins when interest becomes a means of justifying silence in the face of injustice. In this situation, the gap between truth and goodness becomes so wide that being right is separated from being good. If we define the common good as reducing suffering and preserving human dignity, any interest that leads to the perpetuation of injustice is invalid, even if it creates short-term individual and group benefits.

Also, from the perspective of political ethics, great disasters are not only the product of direct evil actors, but also the result of a network of inactions. Neutrality in this sense is a kind of structural facilitation. In other words, the individual does not directly commit the injustice, but by his silence creates the conditions for its realization.

Moral neutrality in great crises is not a neutral state but a normative choice. This choice can arise from epistemic humility or the product of conservative expediency. The difference between the two becomes apparent in the individual's relationship to truth and good. If neutrality leads to the suspension of responsibility, the fixation of inequality, and the continuation of harm, it is unjustified from the perspective of practical ethics. It can only be justified if it is based on honest epistemic doubt or a strategy to prevent a greater evil while maintaining a commitment to truth-seeking and the common good. In great crises, the main issue is not "which side" the individual takes; It is whether one takes a moral stand in the face of suffering and injustice. Silence in the face of oppression, if it is foreseeable that it will continue, is no longer neutrality; it is a covert form of participation. This conclusion is based not on emotions but on an analysis of the relationship between truth, goodness, and responsibility.

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