Guilt and responsibility, or: on travelling through foreign places

Four, five, six, no, seven children are crouching under that tree, jostling for a slither of shade. Do they belong to the same family, or are they friends from across the tracks, just visiting to pass the time? Or, perhaps, are they only here to elicit empathy from the many travellers — men, women and children, with their brightly coloured, overflowing suitcases — standing at the edge of the platform? Behind the children, unprotected from the glaring afternoon sun, I can see three women, all bent over a small pot from which steam is escaping. A few metres to the left, fastened between two trunks and a shopping cart filled with clothes, a ragged tarpaulin hangs above a few thin mattresses. A baby is sprawled in the middle, suckling on an item I cannot make out. Two chickens are there, too, bouncing through the yellow grass, dodging bits of glass and plastic. This is their home. Exposed to the dirt, the heat, the insects and the noise; dependent on the magnanimity of strangers. But even here, confronted with the plight of these poor people, I do not go over to them. I do not give them the last samosa wrapped up in my bag, nor the few coins jingling in my pocket as I shuffle uncomfortably from one foot to the next. I do not even glance back as I step out of the shade. After all, my train is about to leave. I, the tourist, am not condemned to stay.

It is easy, in these situations, to remain idle through an intoxicating occupation of the mind; a carefully nurtured tactic of appeasing our human instinct by, quite simply, suppressing it. The act of looking away is undertaken in conjunction with an underlying mental process: a reassuring rationalisation of one's qualities as a moral human being. But every now and again, particularly in times of comparative ease, this doesn't suffice. Questions begin to linger and images hover in clear sight, taking on new dimensions by the day. What is the correct way to react? Is it possible to draw a line between situations in which I am obligated to help and those in which I am not? Hence, is my moral jurisdiction finite? Moral sounds idealistic, but this issue transcends mere idealism. It is humanistic, going to the very core of our coexistence. Thus: is my humanistic jurisdiction finite? If so, how might it be defined? According to financial incentives, limiting my responsibility to the time, place and description for which I am financially reimbursed? Or else the coercive power of government, limiting my responsibility to arbitrary geographical borders within which I happened to be born? No, despite my actions providing evidence for the contrary, there is no limit to my responsibility for other human beings; my humanistic jurisdiction is infinite, stretching all the way across the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean to the most distant corners of the world. How, then, can I seek to explain my passivity?

It is January in Belgrade, the Serbian capital, and at night temperatures drop to -15°C. Opposite the central station there stands a row of empty warehouses, in which hundreds of migrants are squatting, awaiting passage into western Europe. Blankets are sparse and the buildings are run

down, with broken windows and no insulation. To keep warm the inhabitants huddle around a fire in the evening. Plastic scraps and anything else which can be found is thrown into the raging flames, the poisonous fumes inhaled as collateral damage. While reading this article[1] I am overlooking the clearest stream I have ever seen. The sky is blue; the air fresh; the sun warm against my cheeks. Gentle hills stretch out into the distance, covered in lush green before giving way to impressive rocky mountains which engulf the horizon. As I finish my coffee and the article with it, any thoughts of toxins evaporate. After all, the next town awaits. I, a citizen from western Europe, live in an entirely different reality.

These are just a couple of examples demonstrating the sickening reality of poverty, fortified by a disparity in the enjoyment of human rights owed to luck in the lottery of birth. The plight of the poor is visible everywhere; one must not even leave most neighbourhoods, let alone travel across the face of the Earth, to see it. And yet, regardless of its omnipresence, regardless the stabbing pang of guilt in moments of lucidity, it is easy to ignore. To a certain extent this behaviour is understandable. It is only natural to prioritise family and friends; to install a safety net for when we grow old; to seek a job in a region or culture we consider home. Notwithstanding such personal concerns, we may still choose a career aimed at helping others; donate money, clothes, time and expertise. We may even try to live up to the infinity of our humanistic responsibility. Some will stop for every homeless person they encounter; others will spend time abroad, working in the developing world to pass on knowledge and distribute resources. But despite the many commendable practises in which individuals partake, the residual problem not yet solved is the limited scope of both our individual and collective sphere of influence.

In this sense there is something deeply worrying about the status quo — our inability to eradicate poverty — which is surely the biggest failure of our modern, technologically advanced, 21st century societies. Is it not perverse that we will soon be able to function by merit of a few clicks of a button, conceivably even through the power of mere thoughts, and yet large areas of the planet are lacking in the absolute basic necessities for the preservation of life? Is it not perverse to think of the automation of life on one side of Earth, while just a few hundred kilometres away famine is killing millions of individuals? But what can we, as isolated individuals, do about it? Should we shelve our egotistical instincts and invest all our energy into foreign aid? Do we continue compromising, thereby accepting our limited application to external problems? Should we continue with our studies, until a time where we have gained sufficient expertise? Whilst travelling for the last months, I, for example, delved into my books; justifying my passivity through an intellectualisation of my own reality, along the lines of ‘in-the-future-I-will-be-able-to-do-something-sustainable’, restricting feelings of guilt to the periphery, deferring them, postponing them to a later date. For

[1] Die Zeit #07/2017. ‘Die Gespenster von Belgrad’, Andrea Jeska.

sure, I have come out all the wiser; logically confirmed, morally reaffirmed — yet with the bigger picture left unchanged. Aside the abstract, I volunteer in a desire to help those uprooted by war; I study medicine out of the impulse to heal wounds; I listen and argue in the hope of encouraging similar attitudes. But, again, none of this will even begin to change the bigger picture.

Ignoring the bitter aftertaste of disappointment due to the lack of concrete solutions I have to offer, let this, at the very least, be interpreted as a call to acknowledge the reality of our situation; as a plea for those in power to take responsibility for such global imbalance; and for us fortunate citizens of the developed world, to remain vigil: to be optimistic in times of despair; to continue working in our restricted sphere of influence; to understand and act upon our power as consumers; to vote for those who will fight for change; and, above all, to welcome, despite the potential personal disadvantages, any changes proposed to sustainably revert this perverted order of things. This isn't much to go on, but in terms of translating our moral guilt into political action, it's a start.