

The normalization of evil actions in Doctorow's *City of God*

Eliza Batista de Carvalho Dornas

Abstract:

In Doctorow's *City of God*, a victim's constant exposure to evil leads to his normalization, which ultimately creates a state of indifference, in which evil becomes routine and fails to shock and to promote change.

Keywords: E. L. Doctorow, normalization, evil.

E. L. Doctorow's *City of God* is set in New York and the narrative revolves around Reverend Thomas "Pem" Pemberton, an Episcopalian priest. The story begins with the robbery of the cross in Pem's church. Later, the cross is found in a synagogue on the other side of the city by a couple of Jewish rabbis, Sarah and Joshua. Pem befriends them and falls in love with Sarah, whose father had survived World War II concentration camps. Everett, the narrator, wants to write Pem's biography, for which he interviews the reverend throughout the novel. There are other secondary stories: Sarah's father war memories; the Vietnam War veteran's monologue about his own life and the war; the *ex-Times* guy looking for unpunished criminals whose stories the papers did not conclude; and the B-movie screenplay that Everett imagined. The characters of Doctorow's *City of God* are linked to each other by a series of evil actions and the author refers to Augustine's philosophical and theological text of the same name to discuss the problem of evil.

The first element of an evil action is the perpetrator who must intend to do the action. There are times when the intention is not to cause evil in itself, but to cause good to someone other than the victim or even to protect oneself. However, once the result of this action is evil because there is dehumanization, the action is going to be considered evil. A dehumanized victim must suffer the action. Finally, so that all these elements can interact, they must be part of a group that lives in a certain moral reality.

Immanuel Kant sees the concepts of evil and good within the principles of morality and humanity. He defines humanity as an existing end that limits our actions; that is, our actions must be guided by the limits of our own and the others' humanity, and by the pleasure in doing something or in something's existence. The feeling of pleasure that accompanies human beings throughout their lives and of which they are aware is happiness. Hence, Kant defines the principle of self-love, which guides men toward a certain direction with the single purpose of finding happiness; and the

principle of morality, which is an imperative that commands men and constrains them to actions they may wish to do. These two principles guide all human actions and allow rational beings to live differently from irrational ones because they lead humans to act differently from their instinct, which permits men to live in community, respecting one another. These principles constitute the humanity of rational beings.

Based on these principles and the notion of humanity that derives from them, we can define evil actions as the ones that do not follow the principle of morality and have as their main purpose the violation of the other's humanity. That is, guided by the principle of self-love, the perpetrator disrespects the principle of morality and aims at the violation of someone else's humanity. Kant sees both concepts as determined by the moral law and not as natural concepts; nothing is truly or essentially good or evil. Once established, a moral law determines what is good or evil.

In *Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche states that good and evil are manmade concepts that change according to point of view, time, and convenience. He asserts that men are born part of a certain predetermination, the strong or the weak, and the concepts of good and evil will vary according to one's strength or weakness. He points out that the concept of good was established by the upper class opposed to the lower class. In that way, "good" is not used to refer to those who did good things or to whom good things were done; good refers to a group of people who detain the power (economical and political) and decide to label themselves and their deeds "good." Based on this idea, Nietzsche develops his concepts of good and evil. First, he highlights the fact that the noble, the strong class follows its own morality in a way that is more convenient for those who want to preserve their power, also defining good and evil in a more convenient way: the strong are the good ones. However, Nietzsche thinks that men are born to be exactly what they are; there is no such thing as evolution: if one was born weak, one cannot become strong, and morality is a created and arbitrary amount of social laws, which can be good or not, but that does not really matter. What matters is the inner nature of each human being, which must be respected above all. He believes that people are naturally strong or weak, and they cannot go against their nature.

Despite contradictory and sometimes vague about the concept of evil, Nietzsche states that any form of anti-nature is vicious. Nietzsche sees "good" connected to power and "evil" to weakness. Dehumanization is directly related to weakness, for if one's condition of human being is diminished, this person is weak or was made weak. In other words, if one is destitute of one's human values, either one has no force to fight back and prevent it from happening, or is not aware of the fact, or even did not realize what was happening until it was too late. In any of the cases, the person is dehumanized because of this weakness, and, therefore evil is perpetrated.

An evil action must always dehumanize a victim. When the perpetrator does not intend to be evil but the victim interprets the action as such because there was a violation of one's humanity, evil was done. The victim's perception of the action as evil is not important for its characterization as such. There are cases in which the victim does not feel violated, but the violation occurs, cases in which the victim is dehumanized and still does not consider that it is indeed an evil action. Reaction is not a constitutive part of evil actions; on the contrary, reactions are not expected to exist because evil actions are done by the strong over the weak, being implicit that the

weak do not have strength to react, for if they had, they would not be victims of such actions. If the victim lacks the perception of the evil perpetrated against him, or when the victim lacks the feeling of being dehumanized because he got used to being treated this way, or because it is not possible to react, the evil action has been normalized, due either to routinely occurrence, or to the impossibility to react against it, or to its institutionalization.

Augustine, however, claims that nothing can be evil in essence. Everything is essentially good because the Supreme Existence, which is good, created everything; evil is the defection, as he names it, caused in good things. Man does not have evil in his nature; the faults man commits are evil in themselves, and when man fails and commits an evil act, it is a voluntary failure, not a necessary one. Augustine argues that there is no cause for an evil choice. The evil will/intention is the cause of the evil act, but there is no cause for an evil will. If one says that an evil will can be the cause for another evil will, Augustine answers, an evil will caused by another evil will is not the first will of all; the first evil will has no cause at all (*City* 12.6.6).

In *City of God*, Doctorow uses a narrative form different from the one Augustine chose for his homonymous work. While Augustine develops a philosophical and theological discourse, Doctorow chooses the discourse of literature in the form of a fragmented narrative composed of other narratives that, although connected, are independent of each other. These narratives are fragments of a bigger narrative, the novel, and can be seen as "resonances with everyday truth" (51).

Doctorow answers Augustine with a lack of linearity and fragmented plots, illustrating how we perceive existence, even if it is a perception by fictionalized human beings. Doctorow inverts Augustine's *City of God*, in which evil is non-existent, to show that, in the *City of Men* it is a common occurrence. Whereas Augustine describes a city where men are guided by faith and with Scripture-based rules, which express the will of God, Doctorow portrays a *City of Men* without love or faith in God. For Doctorow, evil exists and men act according to their principles, which are not always in agreement with God's will.

In the novel, several actions exemplify the normalization process. In Everett's B-movie, the wife's lover controls her and her husband in a way that violates their human condition and they do not notice it. The lover intends to destroy the husband just because he can. The wife is not aware of what is happening until it is too late. When she is unable to tolerate the situation, she complains to the police and commits suicide. It is not clear if the lover is found or arrested, but he never regrets doing evil. He wanted to harm the husband and the wife; he was not concerned about himself or what could happen to him if he was discovered.

Another normalization of evil actions occurs in the Vietnam War narrative. The American soldiers were sent to a country they did not know, to fight a war that was not theirs, and to kill people at will, as if they were useless objects to be discarded. The man who tells Everett about Vietnam claims he had to act as the soldier he was expected to be, as "the executioner" who "lived in satanic bliss" (219). He had no option and, at that time, it was normal for him to do just as he was told: he would "kill whoever needed to be killed". Back home with what is left of him, he recognizes his evil actions during the war; however, he considers his evil actions normal occurrences,

because he did what he was supposed to. In his words, "This was not war, this was life as it is, / and was and always will be".

An important evil actions' normalization is narrated through the Nazis dehumanization of the Jews, in the World War II tale told by Sarah's father. He survived through living in a ghetto, being taken to a concentration and to an extermination camp. He narrates the Nazis' evil actions as if he was the secondary character in a movie. He says that everyone acted as if "what was happening was routine, as if this terrible power of the Germans over us were normal" (79). Apparently, everyone else was used to it.

The *ex-Times* guy story shows a subjective process of evil normalization. The ex-reporter decides to end stories the papers have started because "justice fails again and again to catch up in time to effect just endings" (187). He thinks he can kill them because they were once evil. However, he fails to realize that he acts the same way those evil men did. Because his victims do not know someone is coming after them, he succeeds. The *ex-Times* guy has not always been like that; he led a mediocre and boring life and now he feels he can make a difference. He thinks his evil deeds change his life for the better. For him, killing has become not only normal, but also good and just.

These are the most significant evil actions in the novel. These actions show the most different manifestations of evil done by perpetrators who have their own and different motivations. The B-movie and the Vietnam War accounts show evil actions that the characters perceive as such, even if this perception occurs in different moments from when the actions are perpetrated. In the B-movie, the lover knows his actions are evil and doing them makes him happy. His evil doing obeys his principle of self-love, although it disrespects the victims' humanity and principle of morality. He does not normalize his own actions, for they are his final purpose. The husband does, for he fails to perceive what happens as evil, the wife also does, it is only in the end that she notices evil and commits suicide. The Vietnam veteran, on the other hand, does not perpetrate evil in the war because of his private happiness, but because of his instinct of survival, and he only notices that what he does is evil years later. The soldiers, including the veteran, are victims because they are manipulated to fight. The soldiers' private happiness and humanity are violated, as is the group's moral reality, but this time with the official consent. This is institutionalized evil.

In the World War II account, Sarah's father understands what happens as evil but he does not react to it; in fact, he recognizes that "what was happening was routine [. . .] normal" (79). This time the perpetrators' motivations cannot be discussed because they are not present in the literary text. The *ex-Times* guy story presents actions in which the victims were once perpetrators who did evil because of what they consider a greater good, which is the same reason the ex-reporter seeks and kills them. These two last actions are not only normalized but also banalized, as their perpetrators were doing evil to improve the world.

The actions presented differ in purpose and interpretation, but they are evil and have been normalized. The explanation to this normalization is that evil is so present in the victims' daily life, who are so constantly exposed to it, that they fail to notice and interpret it as evil. Dehumanization becomes part of their lives as does having their principle of self-love violated and seeing the group's principle of morality disrespected.

Another reason is the impossibility of reacting to this evil because, once people are unable to react, to avoid suffering evil, they start considering it normal. A force against which they cannot fight becomes part of their lives; they just have to get used to it as one gets used to one's routine.

Sometimes there is a total normalization of an evil action, for instance the Vietnam War account, the World War II account, and the ex-*Times* guy story, in which not only the victims but also the group to which they belong fail to interpret the actions as evil. In the war cases, evil is both normalized and institutionalized, because it is accepted and, at times, requested by the ones in control of the group. In the ex-*Times* guy case, the newspaper, respected by the people in the group, institutionalize evil. The B-movie case is different because the means of communication is the movies. However, it is taken from "given life," which means it is influenced, if not inspired, by real life.

The city presented by these narratives resemble Augustine's earthly city, which is the city where evil is a constant presence. The two main characters, Everett and Pem, represent these two opposing cities. Everett is a rational, secular, and skeptical voice narrating events taking place in the city of men. Everett's view of the city of men reflects Augustine's earthly city. The difference between these two points of view is that Augustine believes men are made good and Everett believes they are evil by nature. The narrator is unable to find answers in rationality and does not accept religiosity either. Pem, on the other hand, is a religious man, a representative of the city of god. Pem believes in God, perhaps not as men have portrayed Him; he does not deny the existence of evil but believes in a higher good.

Both characters are looking for answers to the problem of evil. There is evil in the city of men that has become normal. There is no one to stop or to prevent evil from happening because people have become numb. The novel ends with no solution to this problem. The indifference with which people deal with evil may be a consequence of its frequent occurrences and of the impossibility to overcome it.

Augustine describes the City of God as the perfect world. Doctorow, by showing twentieth-century events, describes the City of Men, and in this city, evil is a constant and necessary presence to the existence of good. There would be no good without evil; the human world is made of these oppositions and contradictions to which a balance is always searched for and never found. The City of Men is the setting of these wars and evil, which are printed in its history and land. As Sarah's father says, the indifference, the calmness with which people deal with evil actions show how they are routine, how they have become normal.

Resumo:

Em *City of God*, de Doctorow, a constante exposição da vítima ao mal leva à normalização do mesmo, criando conseqüentemente um estado de indiferença em que o mal se torna parte da vida cotidiana.

Palavras-chave: normalização, mal, ações malignas.

Works Cited

Augustine. *The City of God*. Trans. Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin, 1984.

Doctorow, E. L. *City of God*. New York: Plume, 2001.

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Vol. 42. Trans. Thomas K Abbott. *The Great Books of the Western World*. 54 vols. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1952.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1966.