

THE DANGER OF BECOMING MORALLY BLUNTED

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Von Hildebrand saw that many people who began with a strong opposition to Nazism could not persevere in this stance; as time passed the force of their opposition weakened and their sense of the evil of Nazism became blunted. They “got used” to the Nazi regime. They did not necessarily change their judgment about Nazism, but they ceased to feel the evil of it. Von Hildebrand tries in this essay to rally his troops by alerting them to this danger of human nature. He admonishes his readers to cultivate a certain inner awakedness with regard to goods and evils—not to take them for granted and not to fail to feel them. He speaks to them as a kind of spiritual master teaching about the interior discipline needed in the encounter with monstrous evil.

Habit is a sort of beneficial adaptability in human beings that can make their lives more bearable, yet it is also a force that can diminish the spiritual alertness of a person, which is the foundation of all true moral and spiritual life. Under certain circumstances, it can even eliminate this alertness entirely.

As long as we are dealing with sufferings that derive from objective disvalues (such as sickness, physical pain, or impoverishment), the fact that a person becomes somewhat accustomed to the suffering is a salu-

tary aid, for it frees him to be responsive to more important and more essential things. Of course, a saint will not rely exclusively on habit: he will first experience the oppressive character of an evil fully and accept it with resignation as a trial. He will not become numbed toward it. The saint will do justice to the meaning of every suffering and allow its purifying effect to unfold completely. The apathy of Stoicism is in no way his ideal. But as long as it is a question of sufferings that are not caused by the destruction of something of objective value, even the saint will get used to them to some extent. And this must be recognized as salutary, for once his resignation and peaceful acceptance of the suffering as coming from God's hand has had its purifying and deepening effect, he becomes free for more important and more essential things, whether in the sphere of the active life or by becoming more capable of appropriately responding to greater and deeper "words" that God speaks to him.

But even in the case of an ordinary person who is not yet capable of this highest affirmation of all sufferings, it is a salutary gift if he does not become continually absorbed by such suffering or constantly oppressed by bitterness, but instead is adaptable enough to grow accustomed to the suffering and thus to become relatively free for other, more important things and to endure the suffering more and more as a matter of course and without noticing it.

But the situation is very different when it is a question of joy rather than suffering. Human beings should never grow accustomed to any gift from the "Father of lights": the sun shining for us, every drink of water that refreshes us, or the physical health and external means that enable us to lead a tolerable life. In such cases, habit has an exclusively negative effect, for the grateful appreciation of all things that are good should never diminish; nothing should ever be simply taken for granted. Here our task must be to restrain the power of habit and to take care that we never become blasé. We must remain grateful for all goods, great or small, with an undiminished alertness.

Even in the case of responses to evils that stem from the loss of a great value, we must never get used to them—for example, the death of a beloved person or a situation in which we are cut off from religious

support. The response God wants from us here is a resigned and peaceful endurance of these evils, not our getting used to them. The magnitude of the loss in such cases needs to be felt in an undiminished fashion.

Most importantly, however, we must not concede any power to habit when it is a question, not of goods or evils *for us*, but simply of positive or negative *values*. We must never grow so accustomed to the beauty of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, for example, or to the beauty of nature, that we are no longer impressed by them. *A fortiori*, we must never become accustomed to the moral goodness of a human being, and still less to the splendor of Christ's holiness. On the contrary, the flame of His holiness ought to be emblazoned upon our hearts more and more. The spirit of *gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam* ("We give you thanks for your great glory") must never wane within us; indeed, it ought to increase unceasingly. Otherwise, as Plato says in the *Phaedrus*, "the wings of our soul" will wither.

Nor must we ever get used to sin—for then moral disvalues such as infidelity, injustice, mendacity, or brutality will no longer make any impression on us. Our consciences become numbed all too easily, not only when we ourselves sin repeatedly without truly repenting of the sin each time, but also when we put up with the injustices of others and so accustom ourselves to a morally poisoned atmosphere.

Whoever habitually consorts with persons who are morally perverted in their basic outlook will, as a result of putting up with their attitude, slowly become poisoned himself, even if he had initially rejected it with indignation and never given it his approval in any way. If he does not "break" with the others, his initial indignation will soon subside and turn into a mere regret; he will become more and more desensitized by getting used to the base moral atmosphere they inhabit. Similarly, if a state, employing the fullness of its inherent dignity, and by means of its divinely ordained authority, enacts laws that profoundly conflict not only with all natural law, but even with the commandments of God; if deeds which must be called criminal are perpetrated on a daily and hourly basis in the name of this state authority; and if the

spirit that fills this state is a spirit of brutal force, unparalleled injustice, diabolical hate, and mindless impurity, there will be a much greater danger of demoralization, even for all those who do not live within its borders.

The tendency to put up with such a state grows stronger, as time goes by, than it would in the case of a single wicked individual. Every new murder committed by an individual occasions the same sort of revulsion in us. The countless crimes of which we hear in the course of our lives fail to desensitize us precisely because we never resign ourselves to them. Each crime remains isolated, and despite their frequency, we never grow so accustomed to them that our criteria change and we tacitly tone down our moral demands. The murderer of Düsseldorf, or the crimes of a man like Harmann, do not make a “common” murder any less horrific in our eyes, or lessen the justified indignation it arouses in us.

But if a state slowly descends—in its official statements, in its legislation, and in its day-to-day conduct of affairs—ever more deeply into immorality and barbarism, then there is a tremendous risk that the populace will gradually become accustomed to its ethical level, that their initial indignation will subside, and that they will imperceptibly lower their own ethical criteria when they see that all the crimes committed by the state go unpunished as it continues to exist with the dignity of its own inherent authority and the formal recognition of other states.

At the time, the laws passed by the National Socialist regime in the year 1933 provoked great indignation everywhere in the world. Since then, however, so many even more terrible things have happened that the events of 1933 no longer make much of an impression on most people. They have gotten used to the Third Reich by means of an imperceptible process of acclimatization that has led to its increasing acceptance. Their own moral sensitivity has suffered harm. The Third Reich is fortunate there is no effective judicial decree that identifies and condemns the kind of spirit that motivates it (although such judgments are often applied to the private murderer and criminal), and this lack allows the force of habit to have its full effect, even with regard to moral

issues. How accustomed the world has become to the rivers of blood, the countless instances of oppression, and the flood of the most terrible injustices perpetrated by Bolshevism!

People generally remain indignant only for a short while. After a certain time, a person tends to become weary of disapprobation, even if the deed that occasioned his revulsion goes unpunished and the sin continues to cry to heaven. If he cannot find relief for his indignation by doing something himself, and he is powerless in the face of the continued existence of evil, he will soon revert to everyday living. On the other hand, his ability to make ethical distinctions would not be weakened in any way if he were to arrive at an inner peace by enduring, as something permitted by God, an evil that he cannot effectively combat—not in any way resigning himself to it, nor wavering in his inner rejection of it, but enduring it with the awareness that he does not have the power to remove every evil from the world. For that can be done only by the Lord God, who says: “Vengeance is mine.” If, however, a person simply permits himself to get used to an evil, if he simply “comes to terms” with it because it exists *de facto* and he cannot change it, then his soul will suffer harm. It is imperative that we recognize this danger and take up the battle against the desensitizing effect of habit.

As Christians, of course, we must never succumb to any embittered attitude of hatred. We must always retain a profound compassion for those who have gone astray, and we cannot allow ourselves to be poisoned by our indignation. Yet we must remain alert. Our indignation and profound sorrow over the fact that a state officially proclaims, propagates, and puts into effect things that make a mockery not only of God’s commandments, but of the most elementary principles of humanity, must not be permitted to abate. There are some monstrosities we must never forget, much less accept, such as the racial materialism of the National Socialist ideology, the policy of sterilization, the legislation regulating marriage, the denial of an objective law, the murders of June 30, 1934, the unparalleled persecution of the Jews (which repudiates any and every human solidarity), the pharisaical trials on trumped-up charges related to foreign currency (leading to draconian sentences that mock any notion of natural law), and the arbitrary defamation of

countless individuals. Nothing should diminish our inner judgment, our unconditional rejection, our consciousness of the horrific immorality of it all, and our determination to fight it with every means available.

This is completely different from a politically motivated attitude of rejection and disavowal (such as occurs, for example, in connection with a revolution). This attitude may well be justified: for we should not “put up” with something we regard as incompatible with the “genius” or tradition of a country. But the rejection of moral and religious disvalues is in an entirely different category. For here we face a threat to the integrity of our moral standards, where “habituation” means that we no longer use our original moral standards to assess measures implemented elsewhere, but instead regard them against the background of the Third Reich. We owe it to ourselves, to our neighbors, and to our homeland to guard ourselves against such moral blindness. As soon as we clearly grasp the threat that the mere existence of the Third Reich poses to our moral vision, much has already been gained.

This may strike many readers as unbridled obstinacy, as riding a hobby-horse or even as personal embitterment. But no such consideration can prevent us from calling attention again and again to this danger or from being resolute in challenging people to alertly judge and resolutely reject the National Socialist ideology and morality. For here too, the words of St. Peter that the Church prays every evening are eminently applicable: “*Fratres—Sobrii estote, et vigilate: quia adversarius vester diabolus tamquam leo rugiens circuit, quaerens quem devoret: cui resistite fortes in fide.*” (Brothers: Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith) (1 Pt 5:8–9).