

On Success

While indeed it is not true that success justifies even the evil deed and the reprehensible means, it is similarly out of the question to regard success as something that is ethically wholly neutral. It so happens that historical success creates the ground on which alone life can go on. The question remains as to whether it is ethically more responsible to go to war like Don Quixote against a new age or, conceding one's defeat, to consent finally and freely to serving the new age. Success, after all, makes history, and the One who guides history always creates good from the bad over the heads of the men who make history. It is a short circuit when the stickler for principle, thinking a-historically and hence irresponsibly, simply ignores the ethical significance of success. It is good that for once we are forced to engage seriously the ethical problem of success. As long as the good is successful, we can afford the luxury of thinking of success as ethically irrelevant. But the problem arises when success is brought about through evil means. In the face of such a situation, we learn that neither the onlooker's theoretical critique and self-justification, that is, the refusal to enter into the arena of facts, nor opportunism, that is, disavowal and capitulation in the face of success, does justice to the task at hand. We may not and do not desire to act like offended critics or opportunists. Case by case and in each moment, as victors or vanquished, we desire to be those who are co-responsible for the shaping of history. The one who allows nothing that happens to deprive him of his co-responsibility for the course of history, knowing that it is God who placed it upon him, will find a fruitful relation to the events of history, beyond fruitless criticism and equally fruitless opportunism. Talk of going down heroically in the face of unavoidable defeat is basically quite non-heroic because it does not dare to face the future. The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living. Only from such a historically responsible question will fruitful solutions arise, however humiliating they may be for the moment. In short, it is much easier to see a situation through on the basis of principle than in concrete responsibility. The younger generation will always have the surest sense whether an action is done merely in terms of principle or from living responsibly, for it is their future that is at stake.

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