

Book Review: Edith Eger, *The Gift*

Eugénio Lopes
lopes_eugenio@hotmail.com

Themes such as evil, suffering, forgiveness, inner healing, the meaning of life, freedom, and self-fulfillment have always fascinated and intrigued many scientists from different areas of knowledge. In fact, these are issues that concern each one of us. That is, all of us, in different ways, have already been victims of other people's evil, something that certainly made us suffer or made someone suffer, respectively; we had to forgive or be forgiven; whenever we are victims, we have to heal ourselves inside and give meaning to our lives, in order to be free and, thus, self-fulfill, so that, in this way, we can, in turn, donate ourselves to others and, in this sense, create a better society, and vice versa.

Likewise, these themes also concern other people with whom we live daily: friends or enemies, family members or strangers, fellow citizens or foreigners, etc. Finally, they do not only refer to the past but also to the present and the future: in fact, we will all be victims or do harm to someone; we will have to forgive or be forgiven; we will have to update, confirm or rectify our meaning of life, etc.

In this sense, I find the work, *The Gift*, by the renowned psychologist, Edith Eger, also known as “the Ballerina of Auschwitz” (a friend and disciple of the renowned Viennese psychiatrist/philosopher, Viktor Frankl), author of the bestseller, according to the New York Times, *The Choice* (2017), therefore, analyzes these themes in different ways and perspectives, using an interdisciplinary study, namely between philosophy, sociology, psychology, education, history.

Thus, Eger divided her work into 12 chapters. In the first, entitled “*The Prison of Victimhood*”, the author analyzes the importance of not only being aware of all the negative experiences we have been victims of but also accepting the past and being compassionate towards ourselves, as well as

forgiving our evildoers. She also highlights the importance of having to continue living with our life, despite the harm we have suffered. In the second, entitled “*The Prison of Avoidance*”, the author continues with the previous analysis, however, highlighting the importance of, especially in ‘neutral’ periods, interpreting our affects (our emotions, feelings, including bodily ones, and states of the soul), in particular the suffering, of giving them a name, accepting them, without judging them or trying to change them. In the same way, the author also highlights the importance of expressing our affections -in this sense, we should avoid repressing them.

Later, in the third chapter, entitled “*The Prison of Self-Neglect*”, Eger emphasizes the importance of accepting and loving ourselves as we are, regardless of what we lived, as well as appreciating and enjoying all the beautiful things around us, as well as taking care of ourselves and loving ourselves. In the fourth, entitled “*The Prison of Secrets*”, the author analyzes the importance of being realistic and authentic, as well as the importance of sharing our negative experiences with others, either individually or in groups.

Subsequently, in the fifth chapter, entitled “*The Prison of Guilt and Shame*”, Eger analyzes the guilt and shame that many people experience in the face of the negative experiences of which they were authors or victims. In this sense, she highlights the importance of being at peace with ourselves and with others. In the sixth, entitled “*The Prison of Unresolved Grief*”, the author highlights the importance of accepting the death of our loved ones, despite these experiences always causing us a lot of suffering. Thus, she emphasizes that we should continue with our lives, which does not mean that we should not recognize and be grateful to them for the benefits they once bestowed on us.

Successively, in the seventh chapter, entitled “*The Prison of Rigidity*”, the author shows how we should not be rigid and perfectionist with ourselves and accept all the negative realities we go through, as well as trying to reconcile with others, however without giving up the truth. In the eighth, entitled “*The Prison of Resentment*”, the author shows how resentment intoxicates us as well as the relationships we establish with others, and also calls for us to update, throughout our lives, our affective education.

Later, in the ninth chapter, entitled “*The Prison of Paralyzing Fear*”, Eger shows how illegitimate fear conditions our identity and freedom, as well as

the importance of always being flexible. In the tenth, entitled “*The Prison of Judgment*”, the author highlights the negativity of the prejudices we create or adopt. It also shows how our malefactors can be our best ‘benefactors’.

Subsequently, in the eleventh chapter, entitled “*The Prison of Hopelessness*”, Eger shows how hope, being realistic and authenticity play a fundamental role in our lives. Finally, in the last one, entitled “*The Prison of Not Forgiving*”, the author shows the importance of forgiveness, condemning, in this sense, the lack of forgiveness and revenge.

In this book, I would like to highlight the following points, which I consider to be the ones that stand out the most in a positive way. Thus, the first consists in the fact that Eger not only established this interdisciplinary relationship, but also resorted to her personal stories, in particular those referring to the time she spent in the concentration camp, and to other people, in particular those that were shared by her patients, to substantiate and corroborate her ideas. On the other hand, the merit of the author is also highlighted in trying to help, in this way and throughout the book, the reader to know how to deal with situations that cause him suffering.

Then, we also highlight the fact that Eger, throughout his work, created a kind of ‘*symbiosis*’ between the main themes of the book, that is, between evil, suffering, forgiveness, inner healing, the meaning of life, freedom, and self-fulfillment. In this sense, I would like to emphasize when the author emphasizes and defends that all of us, without exception, will be victims of the evil of others, some more than others. Allied to this, she emphasizes that every human person suffers, in different ways, regardless of age, gender, culture, or social and economic condition, not only due to the harm that others cause us but also due to other involuntary causes (for example, an illness) or even volunteers. In fact, we can not only cause harm to others but also to ourselves.

Now, concerning the evil that others cause us, this work also highlights the importance that Eger gives to forgiveness. In this sense, she argues that we should always forgive our wrongdoers, independently of who they are or the harm they have done to us (reasoning that also extends to ourselves, that is, we must always forgive ourselves).

However, as the author points out, forgiveness does not consist in not recognizing the harm done to us, forgetting it, or not being indignant about

it. Forgiveness rather consists of canceling hatred and enmity with the wrongdoer, realities that often motivate us, on the other hand, to seek revenge. On the contrary, the author emphasizes that, as we are born to love and not to hate, we must always love even our enemies, due to their ontological dignity. That is, we all have the same dignity (no one is more human than another). Therefore, the ‘being’ of the evildoer is never identified with his ‘doing’, in this case with the evil done against us.

It also stands out, in this sense, the fact that Eger rightly shows that the malefactor often originates evil, because he also once, in one way or another, was likewise a victim of another malefactor and, so on, and who, at the same time, did not know how to forgive his offender and thus free himself. Therefore, according to the author, if we do not want, in the same way, to become a malefactor in the future and thus eliminate this ‘diabolical’ chain, we must, therefore, forgive in order to become free. Another theme that the author skilfully dissects throughout her work also stands out here, that is, inner healing, which must be constant throughout our lives.

However, in this sense, I think that the author commits the metaphysical error of defending that forgiveness is a ‘gift’ only for the victim, as it makes him free. Now, if we look at the etymology of the word forgiveness, which comes from the Latin word *‘perdonare’*, which basically maintains this structure in the neo-Latin languages, we see that forgiveness is also a gift for the wrongdoer, since this derives from the juxtaposition of *‘per’* (para) with *‘donare’* (to donate) –reasoning that can also be extended to English (for + give) and German (*Ver + gebung*).

Returning to our argument, however, concerning the evil of which we are victims, I also highlight the fundamental distinction that Eger establishes between “being a victim” and “victimism”. That is, despite the harm we receive, this should not make it impossible for us to continue with our lives, as can be seen, on the other hand, in victimism. Indeed, we cannot intervene in the past, or even cancel it; however, we can always intervene in the future. It is true that we cannot eliminate what we lived in the past, but we can, despite that, decide about our future. In fact, in line with this point, according to the author, through the evil we suffer we can learn many things that would be impossible to learn in any other way, and, in this sense, grow as people and, thus, contribute to the construction of a better society. Thus, we can, in

a certain sense, thank our malefactors, because, indirectly, they are also our 'benefactors'.

Accordingly, another very pertinent theme, which Eger dissects in her book, is that of hope. That is, no matter how difficult the situation we are going through (and which causes us suffering) is, we should always have hope for a better future, because any negative situation, sooner or later, will end. In this way, hope makes us more resilient to face the negative situations we face. On the other hand, she adds that when they are over, we can become more mature people, thus being able to better serve others. Here lies, therefore, according to the author, the highest level of our vocation, that is, to serve and help others to become whom they have to be, including our evildoers. However, in order to give ourselves to others and thus love them, it is first necessary to love ourselves as well; to heal others, it is first necessary to heal ourselves; in order to make others free, we also have to be free first. Indeed, we cannot 'give' what we do not have...

In this sense, Eger emphasizes the importance of the meaning of life, one of the most focused points also by her friend and teacher, Viktor Frankl, founder of the third Viennese school of psychotherapy, "Logotherapy", who also experienced the Auschwitz concentration camp. In this way, also according to the author, it is necessary as well to be authentic and, simultaneously, we seek not only to be realistic but also to seek our true 'self'.

Faced with a work that is particularly rewarding for its interdisciplinary dialogue and the themes addressed, as well as its methodology and structure, I would like to end this review, if I may, by encouraging Edith Eger, despite her long age, to continue to share not only the experiences she went through but also her thoughts, so that the reader can self-realize and thus contribute to building a better world: in truth, this was the main objective of this work and what motivated, as the author tells us, to survive the concentration camp. In fact, in the face of situations that make us suffer, as she demonstrates, no one can cancel our inner freedom and, therefore, our self-determination in order to give meaning to our lives, even in the moments that precede our death.

References

Eger, Edith, *The Gift*, Scribner, New York, 2020.