

LITERATURE AND EVIL: Dostoyevsky's Poetic Thinking On Evil

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ABSTRACT

Philosophical and theological reflections claim evil as the binary opposite of the good. This way of thinking cannot understand the evil of terror. To understand the nature of evil we need a poetic way of thinking. A poetic way of thinking goes beyond the binary of good and evil. Dostoyevsky locates evil within us contingent and finite human beings. Only by acknowledging this we can gain freedom to act and create.

Key Words:

•*Culture* •*Terror Good* •*Evil* •*Religiosity* •*Purity* •*Poetic Thinking Sartre* •*Baudelaire* •*Battaile* •*Divine Intoxication* •*Dostoyevsky* •*Anthropology-in-Motion* •*Beyond Good and Evil*

We are living in an age of terror. Terror, however, leaves us a puzzling question. How can such an evil drive hide behind purity of the will called religiosity? That puzzle demands a radical deconstruction of our very understanding on the relation between good and evil. The first puzzle: what is evil? All we can sense of evil is an aggressive manifestation of human anxiety. To be precise, it is an anxiety of infinity. Humanity is hollow. Within humanity lies a vast ocean of infinity. It creates anxiety that must be overcome by destroying the haunting infinity. From that point, I believe, a primordial mode of evil is born.

However, evil is usually conceived as good's binary opposition. As good's binary opposition, evil is inferior and can only be defined relative to 'the good' as its parameter. It is necessary to find a new mode of articulation on the nature of evil. Philosophy and theology tried to do so and failed. They talked about evil as something dark crawling under the light of 'the good'. Evil cannot show its true face. It can only be understood as some kind of veil hiding the essence of 'the good'. In other words, both philosophy and theology failed to uncover the radical otherness of evil.

It brings us to the work done by man of letters. Since Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* until Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, evil has always been an important literary topic. We might even say that evil has assumed many forms in the work of literature. Different from philosophy and theology, literature probes into the body of evil not to find its divine message. Literary ways of thinking keep, within evil, something transcendent that escapes the grip of 'the good'. Using Dostoevsky's opus magnum, *Crime and Punishment*, I want to get an insight of evil's radical otherness. It is the otherness of evil that the language of philosophy and theology fails to measure.

Evil

What is this thing we call evil? One thing for sure it is diametrically opposed to the good. As the good's opposition, evil cannot be defined apart from the good. In the tradition of theodicy, for instance, the notion of evil is always discussed in relation to God as the source of the good. The question this tradition poses is how an omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good being can allow the manifestation of evil in this mundane world. The theodicy gives it a final answer. Since this world is the best of all possible worlds, each evil God permits is necessary for some greater good

or to avoid some alternatives that are at least as bad if not worse.

The theodicy's answer proves that evil can never be discussed in itself. It is only a spark in the universe of the good. 'The good' is the hiding logos behind the veil of evil. The hidden essence is rooted in the very being of humanity. It brings us, though, to another question. Is it true that humans are essentially good? Or to put it in a philosophical way: is the human a solid being? Heidegger's reflection on humanity gives us another perspective. According to Heidegger, human life is ultimately nothingness. Living is accepting the fact that human existence is contingent, ungrounded and not chosen². In other words, there's always the Other within a human being.

An ungrounded human being is eternally haunted by the specter of non-being. He finds himself as finite, fragile and vulnerable. These are conditions a fundamentalist cannot accept. He cannot accept the contingency of his life. Instead of loosening his neurotic grip on life, he tightens it to a white-knuckled intensity. Evil is the rest of being outside his being. As a result, it is his duty to transform the rest of being into good. Since he works under the guidance of the good itself, the evils he commits do not count. It is done for the greater good. The question is what neutralizes what? Is it evil being neutralized by the good or the other way around? Haunted by the specter of non-being, humans just cannot give a true and final answer.

The ungrounded condition of the human being deconstructs the premise that evil is merely a veil of 'the good'. Far from being the mask of 'the good', evil is the very non-being of the human. It is a dark alley where no man has stepped his foot before. The problem is that the nature of evil has always been repressed by philosophical and theological reflections. Both reflections put evil as a distorted manifestation of the hidden good. We need another way of reflecting upon the nature of evil as non-being. We need a way of thinking that can grasp the radical otherness of evil.

Literature, I believe, is such a way of thinking. It is a way of thinking that transcends both philosophy and theology. I call it a poetic way of thinking. The poetic mode of thought does not concentrate upon the idea of transcendental logos. It is not a mode of thought toward a transcendental articulation of reality. It is not positive answers that a poetic thinking seeks. Its only mission is to enlarge our space of imagination within our own thought. Philosophers and theological thinking, unfortunately, have abandoned this kind of mission.

Poetic thinking in literature does not work with true/false categories. The true/false dichotomy belongs to the tradition of philosophical or theological ways of thinking. According to both traditions, everything must be measured by a transcendent parameter. It can be God, logos, the first principle or in this case: 'the good'. Poetic thinking, on the other hand, does not apply such parameters in uncovering the radical otherness of reality.

What poetic thinking tries to uncover is the real and not the transcendental other. Why is that so? The idea of transcendence is discriminative in nature. It tries to separate true from false, good from evil and uses the first category as a permanent boundary. What it does not try to seek is what lies beyond that constraint. The idea of the other, on the other hand, is not a criterion of demarcation or measurement; it is an invitation to unexplained lands. It is an explorative way of seeking new modes of articulation.

By way of poetic thinking, beyond good and evil lies possibilities. By reflecting the idea of evil we can see what lies beyond. What is it then? Sartre's reflection on the works of Baudelaire might give us an insight. In his essay on Baudelaire, Sartre defines Baudelaire's moral position as follows:

To do evil for the sake of evil is to do the exact opposite of what we continue to affirm is good. It is to want what we do not want – since we continue to abhor the powers of evil – and not to want what we want, for good is always defined as the object and end of the deepest will. This was Baudelaire's attitude. Between his acts and those of the normal sinner there lay some difference as between black magic and atheism. The atheist doesn't care about God because he has decided once and for all that He does not exist. But the priest of the black mass hates God because He is loveable; he scorns Him because He is respectable; he sets himself to denying the established order, but, at the same time, preserves this order and asserts it more than ever. Were he for a moment to stop asserting it his conscience would return to peace with itself. Evil would suddenly turn into good and, transcending all orders which do not emanate from himself, he would emerge in nothingness, without God, without excuses, having assumed his full responsibility.³

Baudelaire's moral position is that of the priest of the black mass. Evil is committed for two reasons. First, it is done to assert the established moral

order created by God. Second, it is done to reclaim nothingness of that established order. To do evil is to take full responsibility of one's actions. It is not a deviation of our deepest will. It is, as a matter of fact, a proclamation of our liberty. Still in the same essay, Sartre writes:

In order for liberty to be complete it has to be offered the choice [...] of being infinitely wrong. It is therefore unique in this whole universe committed to Good, but it must adhere totally to Good, maintain it and strengthen it in order to be able to plunge into evil. And he who damns himself acquires a solitude which is a feeble image of great solitude of the truly free man. In a certain sense he creates. In a universe where each element sacrifices itself in order to converge in the greatness of the whole, he brings out the singularity, that is to say the rebelliousness of a fragment or a detail. Thus something appears which did not exist before, which nothing can efface and which was in no way prepared by worldly materialism. It becomes a work of luxury, gratuitous and unpredictable.⁴

Sartre emphasizes the dimension of liberty within the structure of evil. It is not a trespassing through the border of the good. It is a pure singularity in the universe committed to the good. Evil is a soliloquy of creation. It is a possible state in which man is no longer supported by the traditional good – or by the established order.

Sartre, by showing Baudelaire's moral position, deconstructs the rigid binary oppositions of good and evil, of infinite and finite. The good is not an infinite notion. It is established in some episodic moment of human history. That kind of historical relativity is precisely like what Nietzsche did in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche shows us that the good is woven within traditions and is as finite as evil. Therefore, evil cannot be put under the parameter of the good. In fact, it is a deconstruction of the established order and an affirmation of a complete liberty. There is no noble motive behind evil action. It is liberty in its purest form: a singularity in the universe of the good.

What Sartre found in Baudelaire's works is a poetic thinking of evil. It does not try to judge evil by the parameter of the good. Sartre uncovers the radical otherness of evil. In its otherness, evil does not succumb to the empire of the good. It denounces it for the sake of singularity, liberty and finitude. According to Sartre, nothingness that shadows the established order of the good will emerge as the development of human consciousness

throughout man's adulthood. Sartre writes:

But if the child grows older, grows superior to his parents in intelligence and looks over their shoulder, (he may see that) behind them there is nothing. The duties, the rites, the precise and limited obligations suddenly disappear. Unjustified and unjustifiable, he suddenly experiences his terrible liberty. Everything has to be begun again: he suddenly emerges in solitude and nothingness.⁶

The poetic thinking about evil has also shown by another French philosopher, George Bataille. In his analysis on Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* he mentions divine intoxication. Divine intoxication is an instinctive tendency to oppose the good. It is a tendency which the rational world of calculation cannot bear. Divine intoxication is the celebration of the present. It denies the equation of present preference to evil. Maturity, according to Bataille's reading of Brontë, is a journey away from the divine intoxication established during childhood.

Evil is not the sacrifice of the present for the sake of future. Maturity is not abandonment of divine intoxication. Reading Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Bataille shows that through desire one is capable of emancipating oneself from all prejudices of an ethical and social order. It is desire to break with the world in order to embrace life in its fullness and discover artistic creativity that is refused by reality. This is the revelation, or rather inauguration, of hitherto unsuspected potentialities. That this liberation is necessary to every artist is certain and those in whom ethical values are most deeply rooted can feel it most intensely. Here Bataille denounces the negative connotation of evil. Evil can be a positive force required for artistic creativity.

Dostoyevsky's Evil

Dostoyevsky is one of the greatest thinkers on humanity. His contemplations have shown the deep complexity of humanity untouched by philosophy. He works by the method of Dionysian art: anthropological reflection is done in motion. His anthropology-in-motion sees things in an atmosphere of flame and ecstasy, and meaning is privileged for those who are themselves involved in the tempest.

Dostoyevsky's anthropology shows human nature to be dynamic in the highest degree. Immobility is only characteristic on the surface; the veil of

customs and the harmony of the soul hide whirling storms, with which alone he was concerned, and he went down into these gloomy depths and unsealed a fountain of light, light more authentic than that which shines on the untroubled surface.

His anthropological pursuits lead to the dark dungeon that lies within the very being of every human. It is not the solidity of being that he seeks to find, but the very fracture of it. In the hand of Dostoyevsky, human nature is being questioned over and over again. Human nature is not an arithmetical expression, he is a mysterious and puzzling being. There is no fixed and untroubled nature. Within the depths of humanity are only contradictories. Dostoyevsky, unlike those Platonian mystics, does not believe that calmth of eternity is to be found in the depths of the soul: unity and quietness are not there but passionate agitation, polarity and antinomy are the radical characteristics of human nature.

Due to this complex nature of the human being, evil is not as simple as it is. When the human being is not grounded in such a fixed nature, misconducts must be seen under a new anthropological lens. Far from deviation of human's solidity of being, evil marches out from the lacks of it. The human being is fractured, contingent, finite and evil springs from this deep, dark well.

This kind of reflection on evil personified in his protagonist Raskolnikov, can be found in the novel *Crimes and Punishment*. Raskolnikov, an impoverished student, plans and carries out the murder of an old woman, who is a pawnbroker. Through unforeseen circumstances he is forced at the same time to kill the old woman's sister. A little after, he assists the destitute family of one Marmeladov, an alcoholic who is run over in the street. The daughter of this household, Sonia (who works as a prostitute to support the family) responds to Raskolnikov's action with reverence, and then with love. Meanwhile Raskolnikov's own family is in extreme financial difficulty. His sister Dounia has been forced to leave the house of her employer, a vicious and unpredictable gentleman called Svidrigailov, and is being courted by Luzhin, a self-important businessman. Raskolnikov interviews Luzhin, finds him despicable and determines that his sister shall not marry him. Meanwhile Dounia and Razumikhin meet and fall in love. All the while, Raskolnikov's family and friends are deeply distressed by his demeanor, which suggests an intolerable degree of unacknowledged suffering. The police suspects Raskolnikov, but the investigator, Porfiry, though he is able to frighten Raskolnikov, is not able to arrest him outright. As Raskolnikov's nervous condition deteriorates, he finds himself haunted

by the watching figure of Svidrigailov, the gentleman who has tried to seduce his sister and is himself in the grip of his own kind of despair. At last, partly in response to the urging of Sonia, Raskolnikov gives himself up and is sent to Siberia. Sonia follows him into his exile and waits while his spirit gradually renews itself.

The question of Raskolnikov's evil is a question of motive. There are two conflicting motives behind Raskolnikov's evil conduct. The first motive is a utilitarian one. Raskolnikov is told to have written an article about the nature of evil. In that article Raskolnikov argues that certain exceptional men have the right to overstep the normal conventions of society. The argument is strictly utilitarian. Evil is justified for the sake of greater good. The second motive is an existentialist one. This motive is exposed after Raskolnikov's conversation with Razumikhin. He becomes violently agitated and cries out inwardly that he was a louse even to have pretended that he murdered with a 'grand and noble object'. We may read the 'grand and noble object' as a utilitarian motive behind Raskolnikov's evil. The existentialist motive is to demonstrate perfect independence of rules and conventions, to assert the freedom to innovate, which is essentially human.

The question is how can there be two conflicting motives behind Raskolnikov's evil conduct. The answer is simple. We must understand the great structural principle of *Crime and Punishment*, the normal order of thought and action is reversed. We are given the evil first and the motives afterwards. This way we are given layers of motives. The first layer is utilitarian. The utilitarian motive, we all know, has been denied by Raskolnikov himself after the conversation with Razumikhin. He even confesses to Sonia the true nature of his misconduct:

I wanted to murder without casuistry, to murder for my own sake, for myself alone! I didn't want to lie about it even to myself. It wasn't to help my mother I did the murder – that's nonsense – I didn't do the murder to gain wealth and power and to become benefactor of mankind. Nonsense! I simply did it; I did the murder for myself, for myself alone [...]. I wanted to find out then and quickly whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man. Whether I can step over barriers or not [...].⁷

Raskolnikov's confession is totally incongruent with what the story has hinted through the conversation between soldier and student.

[...O]n one side, we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, ailing, horrid old woman, not simply useless but doing actual mischief, who has not an idea what she is living for herself, and who will die in a day or two in any case [...]. On the other side, fresh young lives thrown away for want of help and by thousands, on every side! A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman's money which will be buried in a monastery! Hundreds, thousands perhaps, might be set on the right path; dozens of families saved from destitution, from ruin, from vice, from the Lock hospitals – and all with her money. Kill her, take her money and with the help of it devote oneself to the service of humanity and the good of all [...]. One death, and a hundred lives in exchange – it's simple arithmetic!⁸

The true motive, according to Raskolnikov's confession, is strictly existentialist. We might say that Raskolnikov's existentialist motive is an irrational one. However, rationality is not the case here in Raskolnikov's evil conduct. Raskolnikov's arbitrary will is not dictated by anything but the will itself. It is not even the revolt of unconscious impulses against the conscious reason. It is not a libidinal eruption due to the repression by conscious reason. On the other hand, it is conscious reason which is being repressed by libidinal impulses of Raskolnikov. It can be read in the episodic narrative of his killing. At the moment of the killing, his body seems to perform independently of his mind.

He pulled the axe quite out, swung it with both arms, scarcely conscious of himself, and almost without effort, brought the blunt side down on her head. He seemed not to use his own strength in this but as soon as he had once brought the axe down, his strength returned to him.⁹

What do all these narratives mean? The uncovering of the existentialist dimension of Raskolnikov's evil conduct shows the ungroundedness of humanity. There is no solidity of being within human which is usually associated to 'the good' itself. Evil does not surface from trespassing the being of human but the ungrounded condition of that same species. This ungroundedness causes anxiety that leads to suffering. When someone takes full responsibility of his misconduct, he takes the whole burden of guilt by himself.

However, another kind of interpretation is possible. The suffering comes from intense remorse felt by Raskolnikov after the killings. This

remorse comes from the feeling that he had betrayed his own being. He disobeys what his being told him to and not to do. The repression of that remorse is shown by his utilitarian argument. He thinks that what he did was driven by a grand and noble objective. The good intention behind what he did has neutralized his evil. However, repression is merely a repression and not annihilation. It cannot take away the guilt he felt within.

At the beginning Raskolnikov felt that it is the devil that lead him away from the sacred path of the good. He sighed:

Did I murder the old woman? I murdered myself, not her! I crushed myself and for all, for ever [...] but it was the devil that killed that old woman, not I.¹⁰

He feels relieved when he comes to terms with his ungroundedness. It is Sonia, through her true love, who encourages him to come to terms with the fragility of his being. The release of his suffering happens when Raskolnikov tells Sonia about his misconduct. Sonia replies not by hatred but by love. It is, I believe, the highest form of religiosity shown by Sonia. She does not judge Raskolnikov's evil. She treats it as a revelation of humanity's lacks of being, the ungrounded condition, contingency and finitude. The revelation struck her all of sudden. The tears change into shiny eyes, she cries:

Stand up! Go at once, this very minute, stand at the cross-roads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to man aloud, 'I am a murderer!'¹¹

Sonia realizes that some devilish being did not cause Raskolnikov's evil conduct. It is the very fracture of Raskolnikov's being that caused the misconduct. Therefore, rather than hiding behind the pseudo veil of guilt, Sonia endorses Raskolnikov to proclaim his misconduct to the entire universe. Sonia realizes that what Raskolnikov did comes from his very own liberty. God is a perfect liberty. There is something spiritual within Raskolnikov's evil conduct and it is absolutely not 'the good'.

Concluding Remarks

It is the love of Sonia that releases Raskolnikov from the burden of guilt. Religiosity is not the ability to discriminate between good and evil. It is the power to break the imaginary border between those two. It is a possibility to respond to evil with pity and love. Moments Raskolnikov shares with Sonia are moments when he finally realizes the spiritual character of his evil. His evil conduct did not spring from the violation of the sacred good within but from the ungroundedness of his being.

Raskolnikov shows that the conflict between good and evil is not as simple as usually conceived by most religious traditions. These traditions tend to see the conflict as only a superficial one. Evil is only a peripheral phenomena. It hides the true essence of 'the good. In 'the good' all antinomy disappears. However, through Raskolnikov, Dostoyevsky shows that evil has the same spiritual nature as good. It is not necessary to transcend evil by 'the good'. Human nature is not necessarily a godlike calm, the Platonic ideal, but also scorching, variable and full of conflicts. Evil is a revolt against established orders for the sake of spiritual liberty. It is a new mode of articulating evil found by Dostoyevsky's poetic thinking.

End Notes:

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