

The Axiological-I in Dialogue

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Translated by Anna Fraś.

“**T**he human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation’s relating to itself,”¹ wrote Søren Kierkegaard.

In other words, the self is being oneself, selfhood. Selfhood includes being-for-oneself in all its aspects. It is also existence, in a similar sense to the Heideggerian use of the Kierkegaard’s words come to life if we interpret them agathologically. What is at stake for the self that relates itself to the relation it is? Undoubtedly, the stakes are truly *to be*. Negatively speaking, the point is to dispose of the illusions that are in the self. So, relating itself to its own relation to the master, a slave’s self discovers that it is not the master who has enslaved it, but the slave himself is the maker of

¹ S. Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, trans. A. Hannay, Penguin Classics 1989, p. 43.

his own fate. Yet, is it enough to disperse illusions? Does truly being mean being with no illusions? This would be too little. A demon also lives with no illusions. Is it rather not about releasing out of one's depths something that most truly is? What is most truly could be: artistic creation (the aesthetic drama), thinking (the gnosiological drama). But artistic creativity and thought are only particular forms of the good, concrete expressions of the good adapted to circumstances. Doubtless, they are a sign of man's inner creativity, but his essential creativity lies deeper. Truly being means giving birth to the good out of the nothingness of the surrounding evil.

Therefore, for man to be is, in a sense, not to be.

Master Eckhart writes: "People should therefore not worry so much about what they *do* but rather about what they *are*. If they and their ways are good, then their deeds are radiant. If you are righteous, then what you *do* will also be righteous."²

Human existence consists in the good and evil in man preceding being. The more man becomes good, the more he *is*; when he becomes evil, he is less, and falls into nothingness ("you are a nonentity"). Eckhart once again: "This teaches us then that we should make every effort to be good, and should worry not so much about what we do or the character of our actions, but we should be concerned rather about their ground."³

This circumstance throws light on the issue of the range of responsibility, as presented by Lévinas. First of all, it must be underscored that the field of responsibility does not correspond with the field of causality. I can feel responsible for adversity at the other end of the world, though I have not caused it and am unable to help in any way. The experience of responsibility is an expression of my participation in good or evil. Participating in the values of justice, I am affected by each injustice — even if it is beyond the scope of my power: I stand by those who have been wronged, even if nothing practical comes of it. For such is my participation. Indifference would signify lack of participation. Participating in the good, I also experience that the good, on its own, strives to distribute itself wherever it sees an empty space wherever it sees a lack of good. By its nature, the good desires to turn itself into grace and to buy out every slave. Responsibility is an expression of this pursuit. Whether it can be turned into a deed is a different matter.

The circumstance that the good and evil in man precede his existence constitutes the key to understanding man's existential pain: the fatalistic guilt present in the womb of corporeality, Heideggerian Angst, etc. Most broadly speaking, existential pain might be said to be pain expressing the presence of evil. Something has occurred which cannot be put right. This "something" has come out of me. The pain can be so acute and profound that it can even give birth to the "against-oneself" attitude. One would not be able to be against oneself, however, were it not for more

² Meister Eckhart, "Talks of Instruction," in: *Selected Writings*, trans. O. Davies, Penguin Books 1995, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

124 fundamental [being] for-oneself which is the ground for being against; the “against” ruins the “for.” The presence of evil is manifested by an awareness of guilt. It does not have to be a moral guilt. The ground for a concrete moral guilt is the existential guilt, which shows not what I have done, but who I am. A part of this guilt may be an illusion: I was under the illusion that I was better than I am. Another aspect it has is the pain of weakness: I thought I was stronger (the ruin of the Nietzschean will for power); “For the good which I will, I do not; but the evil which I will not, that I do” (Romans 7:19). All the varieties of existential pain meet in Kierkegaard’s famous sickness unto death: man desires death for he is not worthy of existence, but death does not come; man lives despised by people, God and himself. Being evil, he has made his existence evil. In spite of this, he does not die.

The self is, in its essence, a struggle for selfhood. This struggle consists in inner creation: to bring good out of evil. The greater the evil around us, the greater the opportunity to create. By creating good, selfhood is being born.

The core of selfhood is the I. What kind of an I? The I is an axiological point of selfhood. The primal I of man is his axiological-I. It is a value capable of giving birth to values: choosing the good that has chosen it. I is not a being. It is not a non-being, either. It is a value that calls for a translation into being. Although it is not a being, it reigns the consciousness — it reigns as an inner value, confirmed by each choice, each creation of values. The axiological-I is the center of participation: it is like a focal point gathering around itself all the participation man can muster.

The axiological-I is, in a sense, absolute, as it is the ultimate subject of values and value-bearers that appear as my values and my valuables. Despite this, it calls for external confirmation. The axiological-I needs mother and father. If its mother is general participation in the good, which characterizes subjectivity, then its father is the Other — man or God. The Other confirms it and, by this confirmation, strengthens it, gives it certainty. When the Other says “you are a zero,” the axiological-I feels like an orphan. When the Other says “better are you than many sparrows,” the axiological-I revives and becomes all the more capable of radiating the good. The axiological-I, despite being absolute, is born and dies in dialogue, whose essence is less an exchange of words than an exchange of things of value.