

Agathology

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Translated by Artur Rosman.

Our presentation of Lévinas' view has been selective. It has only presented the fragments which were especially dear to the author of these words. Specifically, they constitute a good preparation for an introduction to a concept crucial for the philosophy of drama, the concept of the agathological horizon, in which the idea of drama is further refined.

When encountering the other, I meet him within a horizon, which makes an encounter possible at all, and at the same time is its doing. The encountered other, and I along with him, find ourselves within a space in which something is better and something is worse, that is, good or evil. This space is not the ordinary space of Euclidian geometry, but a hierarchical space. The good is called *agathon* in Greek.

Logos, on the other hand, means that which is reasonable, wise. Let's put it this way: the encounter

is the opening of the agathological horizon of interpersonal experience.⁶³ The agathological horizon is a kind of horizon in which all the manifestations of myself and the other are controlled by a specific *logos*—the *logos* of good and evil, what is better and what is worse, of rising and falling, victory and defeat, salvation and damnation. How does it work? When the encounter happens, I do not yet know, but I do know that something like this is at stake with every encounter.

The drama opens up the possibility of tragedy. The essence of tragedy is the victory of evil over the good. When we think about the essence of tragedy we can come closer to understanding the nature of evil. Striving for self-destruction, which is something that Heidegger mentioned, derives from the nature of evil. To destroy evil means to mete out justice to evil, but in tragedy something altogether different happens. The tragic tangle of events is characterized by evil triumphing instead of being vanquished—for his deed of mercy Prometheus is punished. In running away from destiny, King Oedipus becomes its victim. The Just One dies crucified between thieves.

Tragedy ends with an event in which the good shows its powerlessness in the struggle with evil. We use the word tragic to describe the possibility of tragedy. Drama conceals within itself a tragic germ, because it opens up the road to tragedy as a possibility. Whoever takes part in any drama rubs up against the possibility of tragedy; participates in some way in tragedy. This is why the perspective of the tragic is the inseparable background of every encounter. This does not mean that tragedy is always given clearly.

Here we must make a polemical remark directed against Max Scheler and his understanding of tragedy. First Scheler correctly notes that, “All that can be called tragic is contained within the realm of values and their relationships. In a universe free of values, such as that constructed by mechanical physics, there are no tragedies. Only where there is high and low, nobleman and peasant, is there anything like a tragic event.” Scheler’s remark acknowledges the substantial difference between horizons: within the horizons of things (scientism) there is no possibility of tragedy, this possibility only appears within the horizon of values—human values. Scheler writes, “The tragic is apparent only where the strength to destroy a higher positive value proceeds from an object possessing this positive value. The manifestation is, moreover, purest and clearest where objects of equally high value appear to undermine and ruin each other. Those tragedies most effectively portray the tragic phenomenon in which, not only is ever one in the right, but where each person and power in the struggle presents and equally superior right, or appears to fulfill an equally superior duty.”

The phenomenon of the tragic has something like two layers: first is the clash of positive subjects of value, advocates of the law and moral order; the second is the intrigue of evil which pits honest men or gods against one another and forces them into battle. Evil comes from good beings turning against each other as enemies. What makes them turn

64 against each other? Who? Fate? Blindness? A demon? It is tragic that Prometheus offers fire to men and the gods have to punish him. Pilate knows that Jesus is righteous, but has to wash his hands. Therefore the good has become an adversary of another good, evil has gotten between them and has become a fundamental principle of tragedy.

There are many possible sources of tragedy, but all of them can be derived from two fundamental principles: from weakness and ignorance. The tragedy of Prometheus, chained to a mountain in the Caucasus is a tragedy of weakness—the tragic nature of fettered freedom. His own situation contains no mysteries for Prometheus.

Prometheus suffers in full light, even in an excess of light, he knows why, and knows that there is no solution for him. It is different with Oedipus. The tragedy of Oedipus, as it becomes apparent, is the tragedy of ignorance. Oedipus has enough strength to escape his destiny, however he is surrounded by delusions everywhere, he falls victim to his fate because of them. There are also many possible tragedies composed from combinations of weakness and ignorance. As a result a situation can come about in which the main source of pain becomes knowledge. The wise man might die from an excess of truth. Nevertheless, these and similar types of tragedy are derivative, built on specific conceptions of the good, evil, man, and human fate. The theory of the encounter does not require us, at least for now, to consider these concepts more fully.

The possibility of tragedy goes hand in hand with the possibility of triumph. By opening up the first, drama simultaneously opens up the second. Triumph signifies the victory of the good against whatever pits itself against it. The idea of a triumph unveils a slightly deeper look at the nature of the good. The good is that which by its nature strives to come into being. To let the good be means to render justice unto it. The good which has come into being despite evil is a heroic good.

Hegel noted rightly that “The general background of a tragic action is provided in a tragedy, as it was in the epic, by that world-situation which I have previously called the ‘heroic’ age.” The heroic triumph of the good over evil can take on many forms: it can be a triumph of power which unveils the indestructibility of the good, or the triumph of the truth which demonstrates the limitation of all delusions. The ideal form of triumph would be a synthesis of one and the other: the good would show itself as both indestructible and evident.

The encounter with the other is an encounter with that which is truly beyond me. The other is simply a transcendental. The other puts me in a situation in which, even by ignoring him, I acknowledge that he exists. The presence of the other is a live consciousness of the intuition of existence. But the existence which comes along with the other is not a neutral existence, a pure existence, a perfection that manifests essence. This existence is described agathologically. In other words, it is an existence problematized in its value by the ineluctable perspective of tragedy.

We cannot separate the experience of this existence from the experience of evil which threatens it, from the unhappiness it threatens others with, nor from the good for which it must battle and which it must demand from others; even if it does not understand what either the good or the other consists in. The existence of the other exists in time. However, time is not a fundamental reality here; rather it is that toward which time is heading. When encountering such an existence in the other, I know that this existence is not as it should be. Real life is absent. But not only his existence is this way; mine is as well, so long as I see it in the perspective of a mutual drama.

Prometheus suffers chained to the mountain, left to be pecked by the vulture, condemned to an eternal suffering without hope for death. The myth of Prometheus is one proposal for understanding every human existence. Why is human life like this? What is the punishment for? What is the source of our guilt? Oedipus runs away from destiny, but nonetheless falls victim to it. This is also a symbolic representation of human fate. Why is it like this? It was said of Judas that "It would be better for him if he had not been born." What about us?

In Plato we find a symbolic description of the human condition in a cave. There man was deprived of freedom and of the ability to truly assess the world. The Thomistic ontology proposes a theory of accidentality of all encountered being, according to which the very essence of being, differing from existence in a real way, constitutes the finitude, imperfection and uncertainty of beings. Blaise Pascal develops the thought of man enclosed between two infinities: infinite minuteness and infinite immensity; incapable of understanding either one.

All these conceptions are, as I see it, an indirect commentary on what is given to us in the experience of the encounter. They are explications of the basic human condition that are poetic, ontological and mathematical, but that condition shows itself in full light only in encounter. These interpretations not only describe the situation, but also attempt to explain it. They unveil that which is—referring being to some measure. The measure of being becomes either full freedom, or full clarity, or a pure act of being, or infinity. But before we move toward measure we must experience measurability. Measurability is given to us in the encounter. When facing it we ask, "How is it possible?" This is not just a question out of mere curiosity; it comes out of a deep commitment.

Through encountering we discover that real life is absent, and we fall into stupefaction. This is not wonder. Wonder is joy at the sight of the good, beautiful, and true, which show themselves to be at least triumphant in the smallest degree. Nor is it really the opposite of wonder—shock at the sight of victorious evil. What we encounter within the agathological horizon is neither the victorious good, nor victorious evil.

It is that in which the good has been exposed to the working of evil. From this comes stupefaction. From stupefaction comes the questions, "How is this possible?" How is it possible that Prometheus should suffer

66 because of the good, that the retreating Oedipus should become the victim of fate, that Judas would betray, and the Righteous One should die on the cross? Within such a question rebellion is mixed with acceptance. We rebel against leaving the good to be the prey of evil, we accept the good endangered by evil.

The question born from such roots is concerned with the essence of existence: to be—is it good or evil? Existence is a mysterious category in which the good might unite or intertwine with evil. And so is it better to be or not to be? Scheler used to say, “The existence of negative values is a negative value.” Is existence at all able to get rid of this negation? Encounter, only the encounter is the source of the deepest metaphysical questions.

According to Lévinas the proper horizon of the encounter is the ethical horizon: “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other’s ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.” There is a full ambiguity hidden within the concept of ethics. By ethics we most often means a certain *praxis* of man with man—one or more. Ethics is both a wisdom and an art that serves action, by readying rebukes and praise that define ways of being and acting with others. In some instances it takes on the shape of a system, in others aphorism, morality and confession. Yet, the agathological horizon is much more basic than all projects of acting. It is a horizon of light rather than power. By encountering the other, I do not yet know what I ought to do, or not do: I do not know whether I should do anything, whether anything can be done in the situation. I only know one thing: it should not be this way.

What I have said in principle overlaps with the concept of desire in Lévinas. Abraham’s desire had two aspects: the discovery of the promised land went hand in hand with discovering the land of exile. The one could not be separate from the other.

However, let’s make a distinction and guide ourselves by this distinction: the agathological horizon and the axiological perspective. The fundamental function of the agathological is unveiling and problematizing. It is similar to the light and to silence. Real life is absent. From this comes the stupefaction and the question of metaphysics, “How is it possible?” The agathological makes one think. That which is axiological points at directions of action. That which is agathological causes existence to become a problem. The axiological points at ways of salvation.

The agathological knocks man out of his present rhythm of day and night, knocks him into a border situation, in which freedom accepts or rejects itself, reason either wants or does not want to be itself, the conscience disavows itself or avows itself. The axiological is the space where freedom, reason and conscience act. The dimensions of this space depend upon how strong man feels; therefore, at times it is larger, at others smaller. The agathological awakens feelings of power and weakness. It gives man an awareness of the borders and limitations of humanity.

When we encounter the other we happen upon his face. What is the face? Lévinas has brought us closer to the answer. By referring to the terminology we have introduced we can say: the face of the other does not come from the axiological horizon, but from the agathological horizon. Before we attempt to positively approach the fundamental question we will pose a helpful negative question, "What is not a face?" The face is neither a cover nor a mask. What is a cover? What is a mask? ⁶⁷