

Wandering within the Heart of the Good

Józef Tischner

Translation of „Błądzenie w żywiole dobra” [Wandering within the Heart of the Good] in: Józef Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu*, Kraków: Znak 1998, pp. 174-193.
Translated by Artur Rosman.

Our attention will continue to be focused on the mystery of encounter. To encounter, above all, is to encounter the other person. In truth, we also speak of the encounter with God or a work of art, but in a sense that is metaphorical, not literal. The experience of the encounter, or more precisely, the living-experience of an encounter, puts the one who encounters someone within the personal truth of the encountered person.

The power of persuasion that this kind of living experience carries with it cannot be compared with the power of persuasion of any other experience. When I encounter I know that the other person exists, and that he is toward me just as he really is, without masks or veils. Usually I cannot describe what I see and feel, despite the fact that I know that since the moment of encounter my life has taken on a new meaning, while the surrounding world has gained a new principle of

organization. The living-experience of an encounter is not only the peak ⁶⁹ experience of another person, but also the peak of all experience.

Encountering requires descriptions from various sides. I have already turned our attention upon the ambivalent role of beauty, which sometimes *seems to* open up encounter, but later often leads the encounterer and the encountered toward dead-ends. Presently I would like to take up the question of the role of evil—the evil incarnated in the one whom I encounter—which is sometimes the cause of reversal and retreat, of breaking all contacts with *an evil person*. Does such a retreat make an encounter impossible?

Does this not indicate, at least indirectly, some truth about the encountered person? When we take up a topic formulated thus, we cannot avoid the question about the essence of the phenomenon of evil. What incarnates evil in the other? What does the evil person threaten me with? Questions like these force themselves upon us all the more, because the experience of the *evil person* is not only a certain way of experiencing a man as a man, but at the same time it is a primordial way of experiencing evil as evil.

The experience of *objective evil*—evil things, evil events—seems derivative, impossible. Phenomenology was supposed to be, according to Husserl's aims, a science of the essence of phenomena, based upon ordinary experiences of objects. If so, then it has to include the experience of encounters in a special way when studying the essence of the phenomenon of evil.

Considering the phenomenon of evil through the prism of the I-Thou relation has very serious consequences. This is because it signifies a stepping beyond the ontological area of studying evil. What characterizes the ontological way of considering the mysteries of evil? In general, it depends upon an attempt to reduce the concept of evil to concepts derived directly or indirectly from the concept of being.

In these considerations it is presupposed, more or less clearly, that the concept of being is a more luminous concept and more general, whereas the concept of evil is dark and more concrete. Thus, the fundamental distinctions relating to being should in some measure be applicable for conceptions of evil. Thus it is said: that which is, is good, however much it is; being is a good, evil is non-being. The key question of ontology is always, though formulated in a myriad of ways, the question of evil's manner of existence.

Ontology, in order to know what evil is, asks above all about in what manner evil exists. The question about the manner of existence takes on the character of an essential question in ontology. This kind of question already contains its answer. In principle there are only three possibilities: evil is being, evil is non-being, or evil is the lack of harmony between some beings. Does this exhaust all the possibilities of answering the question as stated?

Is there no other choice? These kinds of speculations seem improper. Perhaps the application of the phenomenological method to study evil will unveil other perspectives?

The phenomenological way of asking about the essence of evil seeks to throw light on the phenomenon of evil, as opposed to phenomena that are most closely attached to evil. It is more essential to capture the differences than to show similarities. Evil threatens, but it entices at the same time. We cannot say that evil is something real, because if it were, then it would not entice in order to come into being.

Nor can we say that evil does not exist, because that which is not cannot threaten, fill with anxiety, horrify. What can we say in this situation? We must strive to show evil as a phenomenon, abstracting (at least for a while) from evil's relation to being and non-being. Evil is like something that is given, and not like something that is defined. In a concrete interpersonal experience evil is less an axiom of our thinking, than it is an axiom of our experience.

Upon this axiom there rest other, more derivative experiences of other people. The experience of the evil incarnated in the other belongs to *axiomatic experiences*—it can be found alongside such experiences as the experience of beauty, goodness, holiness—that mark out the sense and the core of other associations with men. Of course I am only considering those instances in which the evil of the other is given in an indubitable way. I know that the other is an evil person, the only thing I do not know is what this means, what his evil is based upon.

Evil is *given*. I will not ask whether this is a semblance or not. I know I have experienced this in a sufficiently clear way—some evil is incarnate in the other person. I experienced that evil in such a way that all doubts disappeared as to whether the other is or is not evil. I repeat: evil is given in an axiomatic experience whose power of persuasion is beyond rebuttal.

This evil threatens me, but simultaneously it entices me. It pushes away, but pulls in. It threatens, but in this threat some temptation is present. It wants to deprive me of hope, but it also promises hope. The snake in the biblical paradise says, “You shall be like gods.” Evil appears upon the horizon of an ambiguity.

It is the forbidden fruit around which everything circles; when God says that the picking of the forbidden fruit is a sin; when the mysterious tempter says that the picking of the fruit appears as a good. How is it really? Who should we believe?

Whatever we might say, evil might appear here within the horizon of a discourse between beings which are capable of dialogue. The fruit “in itself” is neither good, nor evil; at most it is beautiful. It is only the picking which in itself is an element of dialogue and shows the hidden sense of the fruit.

For the tempted person evil appears as an integral part of a conditional period whose general meaning can be expressed thus, “if you commit act X, the good Y awaits you, if you do not commit act X, good Y will elude you, but you will encounter evil Z.” As we can see, deed X is what everything is all about. This deed is at one point recommended, at

another point forbidden. What are things really like? Both temptation and threat direct themselves toward being, which itself is directed toward the future, where they touch the experience of hope. ⁷¹

Temptation enlivens hope, threat undercuts hope. Of course the same hope is not at stake, but rather that man abandon one hope and reach for another. For the tempter in the garden, only the following hope matters: to be like God. Evil has many ways of persuasion, according to its knowledge of the pains and joys of man. Pain and suffering incapacitate man, undercutting all rebellion within him.

It is as if evil knows about this, and thus strives to take control over the pains of man and through controlling pain it aims to control the whole man. It also knows that pain drains man's powers, that a man troubled by pain falls into inertia. To get around this inertia and to push man into action, evil must give him some hope. From this comes the promise that man will be like God and know good and evil.

Evil in itself, by threatening and tempting, presupposes that in man there is some space of freedom. The more evil threatens and tempts, the more it reminds us that man has some pole of choice, some freedom. Thus, the minimal gift of evil is the experience of freedom—freedom exposed to a trial.

Besides future evil, which is the content of the temptation and threat, we are also given past evil, already accomplished. It also appears within the context of some wider whole. We say, "if I did not commit X, I would not have encountered evil Z." Deed X showed itself to be something like an opening for an evil that was waiting at the gates. A characteristic trait of evil is that, once it is realized, it does not pass, but in some way continues to exist.

The endurance of past evil is closely tied with the endurance of suffering, a suffering that questions not only the fact of my life and my existence, but also the "moral right" of existence, the very right to exist. Suffering is a matter that makes my apparently healthy existence unbearable to me. I know that what I have become is not what I should be.

I would like to hide, go away, cleanse myself, and atone. Consciousness of evil that has come to be within me and was brought by me into this world reduces itself to the agathological knowledge of my existing in an unjustified existence, and so my non-existence would be justified. I know that I should not be, but despite that I am. There is some kind of contradiction in this. Consciousness of this contradiction is pain, the pain of the evil existing within me.

It becomes apparent that the phenomenon of evil is marked by several elements that circumscribe its conditions of possibility. Above all, it cannot be thought without some kind of suffering. Suffering is not only a symptom of evil already committed, but also of the evil that threatens. The experience of evil likewise cannot be thought without some pleasure, bliss, joy. Evil entices, evil tempts, evil tantalizes. Evil as the source of suffering and bliss is ambiguous, simultaneously truthful and lying. This is why evil cannot be understood without delusion.

Irrespective of the kinds of evil, the motive of delusion is, as it seems, present in every evil. This motive makes us think about the shrewdness of evil and at the same time its dumbness. Evil is shrewd because it tempts and entices. Evil is dumb, because it has to utilize delusions. And now at last we come to the other person.

If there were no other people would evil be evil? It seems that evil—regardless of from where it comes—always appears in the space between people as a specific reality, dialogically conditioned. As an interpersonal reality evil separates and brings together people, joins and divides, it destroys some completely, while it allows others to endure.

Evil first appears—even before it is realized—in two experiences that are contrary to each other: in the experience of threat and the experience of temptation. Threats cause an escape response, temptations spur attraction; however, one cannot be separated from the other.

For the sake of our analysis, however, we shall consider these two aspects of evil separately, starting with the threat and the flight elicited by it. We will concentrate our attention on three questions: What is the escape from evil? How does it differ from misfortune? What does it mean to say that evil is an interpersonal reality conditioned dialogically? These three questions will help us frame our inquiry about the boundaries of evil, and thus the relationship between good and evil, which in turn will open up the road to analyses of the experience of evil with temptation taken into account.

Our minds will, of course, constantly be occupied with the evil with which the other threatens or tempts us. This is because we are continually considering the encounter. We will leave past evil and evil that constitutes a separation beyond the space of our reflections. We will deal with this matter in the chapter on separation.