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The Ontology of Evil and Its Anthropological Moment of Freedom in Pär Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf* and Plotinus' *Enneads* (I.VII-VIII)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide a philosophical reading of a famous novel by Pär Lagerkvist entitled *The Dwarf*. The novel's protagonist is to be found as the embodiment of evil. His diaries explore his own identity. Hence the paper shall employ the Dwarf's confessions to describe the ontology of evil. That will be then compared to the classical metaphysics of good and evil based on Plotinus' *Enneads*. The ideas of evil's homogeneity, impenetrability, infertility and absurdity are studied. In the conclusion, the utmost importance of human freedom is indicated in these works of both Lagerkvist and Plotinus.

Keywords

Ontology, Evil, Freedom, Lagerkvist, Plotinus

Introduction

In 1944 the renowned Swedish writer Pär Lagerkvist, later a Literary Nobel Prize Winner in 1951, published a short novel titled *Dvärgen* (*The Dwarf*, an English translation by Alexandra Dick was issued in 1945). The book consists of a diary jotted down by a dwarf serving his master at a Renaissance Italian court. The fictional character of Prince has been presumably based on the historical figure of Ludovico Sforza (Mjöberg 1951, 168). He and his fellows go through numerous trials: love, betrayal, war, conspiracy, murder,

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suicide, siege, and finally a plague of pests. Although the Dwarf always stands behind the ruler's acts and decisions, the influential role he plays in the novel's plot is not obvious to the others. Yet, it goes without saying that he is the true embodiment of evil that lurks in the murky abyss of the Prince's soul. All the calamities that afflict both the castle and the entire country have their source in the Dwarf's deeds and speech. In his private writings, the protagonist sheds some light on his nature and how he construes the world. By going deep into the Dwarf's values and motivations one can find the genuine identity of evil. The diarist's remarks seem to be particularly fertile ground for a philosophical reading due to their dedication to the issue of existence, meaning, and true perception of reality. In this paper I want to reconstruct the theory that lies behind the Dwarf's stature. I will try to find what his philosophical position is. In other words, my aim is to paint a picture of the ontology of evil based on Lagerkvist's prose.¹

This philosophical reading must find its counterpart and polemist in the classical tradition of the metaphysics of good and bad. When exploring it I want to compare Lagerkvist's ontology of evil with the ideas of goodness and bad in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. Plotinus (204/5-270 C.E.) was an influential philosopher of antiquity. His famous *Enneads* consist of six books presenting a Neoplatonic vision of the universe with its central point, namely: goodness. One of its most frequently discussed passages is Chapter VIII of The First Book. There the idea of rational dealing with evil is coined and the theodicean debate commences. The ontologies of Plato and Lagerkvist's Dwarf seem to be radically opposite models and there emerges an inevitable conflict between different views on the fundamental structure of reality. My aim, however, is not to give a decisive argument for one side of the struggle or the other. Instead of tilting the balance of consideration in someone's favor, I would rather attempt to point at the importance of human freedom in facing evil. In my opinion both Lagerkvist's protagonist and Plotinus imply it, despite being less than eager to admit it.

¹ The issue of evil was obviously discussed in many of Lagerkvist's novels and short stories. Some examples are *Bödeln* (1933) (in English: *The Hangman*), *Barabbas* (1950), *Mariamne* (1967). In this paper however I will solely dwell upon *The Dwarf*, because it employs a complex ontology of evil. Therefore it provokes to ask some philosophical questions. Moreover, I have no ambition to track down the issue of evil in Lagerkvist's early poetry (e.g.: some moving poems of *Ångest* (1916) with their poignant depiction of fear). Yet, I am aware that many of dialogues in the novel repeat poetic phrases that come directly from Lagerkvist's poetry (Szewczyk-Haake 2017, 255-257).

This consideration of evil will pinpoint four aspects of it: (1) homogeneity, (2) impenetrability, (3) infertility, and (4) absurdity. Then I will move to its special moment: (5) freedom. The next few sections shall follow that order.

1. Homogeneity

At the very beginning of his self-portrait the protagonist claims boldly: "I am a dwarf and nothing but a dwarf" (Lagerkvist 1973, 4). The intention of saying that is to cast away all the auxiliary roles that the Prince and his court have ascribed to the protagonist. Although it is often believed that he is a servant, "a buffoon" held at the castle to tell jokes and play tricks for the enjoyment of the rest, the Dwarf is fully aware of his genuine identity. What is more, all attempts to engage him in playing some tricky roles are futile. It is the Dwarf himself that radically transforms the tasks given to him. By following them to their unforeseen ends, he makes others fall into a state of anxiety and then into terror. One can easily recognize this in a scene where the Prince's family wants him to play with the Prince's daughter Angelica, and the Dwarf manifests his animosity towards that by secretly killing the girl's beloved pet. It is also the case of the carnival arrangement in Mantua. Although the Prince compels the Dwarf to play a dwarflike bishop, to celebrate a dwarf holy mass and to give a communion to the other dwarfs, in his sermon the protagonist shocks his audience. With his words he converts an innocent jest to a fearsome eruption of evil that truly intimidates all the spectators. People are prone to misconstrue his real nature. They judge the Dwarf after their own forms of being. Contrary to that the protagonist says: "they all play, all pretend something. Only I despise this pretending. Only I am" (Lagerkvist 1973, 13).² Usually it is believed that the Dwarf's identity consists of the many innocuous parts he plays in courtly life. Yet, in fact, his real nature is truly homogenous. The Dwarf's actions are not harmless pranks, but rather different manifestations of a steady drive towards destruction. To the fear and confusion of the Prince's family, the drive is the only thing that really exists.

² One can also pay attention to a first-person narrative form and the very first words of the diary. The Dwarf starts his confessions with a bold claim: „Jag är [...]". It has been often interpreted as a typical self oriented egotism of a modern age man that distinguishes him/her from a collective existence of his/her Middle Ages precedestors (Lewan 1995, 256). One needs to remember that in a modern epistemology of Descartes ego is the first thing that a true existence can be ascribed to.

The protagonist confirms his internal consistency by saying: "I who am always the same, who am quite inalterable" (Lagerkvist 1973, 33) and then "I am ever myself, always the same, I live one life alone. I have no other being inside me" (18). He is constantly surprised by the human feature of combining opposite feelings, desires and needs. How is it to simultaneously love and detest the very same person? How can a human being both reach the heights of knowledge by means of reason and concurrently stumble into the pitfalls of uncurbed pride or blind instincts? With these ambiguities the Dwarf is completely unfamiliar, and he grows uneasy. He finds it "incomprehensible." He realizes the existence of such ambiguity in a human world, but its comprehension lies far beyond his scope. To the homogenous embodiment of evil there is no place for a nuanced variety of values. Words and deeds are all of one nature. One can find here an anthropological difference that separates a human being from a dark reality of beings constantly permeated with evil. What I want to demonstrate in the very last section of this paper, is that this opacity of humans is the sole hindrance evil cannot break through. Hence in the ambiguousness of the human will is to be found the last hope for the opposition of evil.

As already said above, the Dwarf is a creature consistent in his values and intentions. Therefore, one cannot extract different parts of his identity without saying they always finally converge in the homogeneous nature of evil. This however does not mean that evil is not participating in some greater and larger entities. Evil is not divisible, but it can indeed divide other things by sneaking into their core. The Dwarf as the embodiment of evil often plays a role of an inner voice, a hidden face, a latent facet of the complicated novel's characters. This type of relation is emphasized in the diarist's depiction of the Prince. The protagonist confides that he "follows him [the Prince] constantly, like a shadow" (5). And it is even the Prince himself who rhetorically acknowledges this before going to war, announcing that he is taking his servant with him: "Can a prince be without³ his dwarf?" (43) The Dwarf must endure harassment and abuses cast upon him by the Prince's subjects. Nevertheless, he is fully aware that all the insults and calumniations had been originally aimed at the Prince. The fact he has been attacked in place of his master makes him proud of being a vital part of the Prince. The Dwarf says: "It proves that I am a part of him and occasionally represent his noble person. Even the ignorant mob understands that the master's dwarf is really

³ The original Swedish word *undvara* says even more than the English translation: *be without*. The Prince is concerned not only about his being or existence, but he also means the ability to manage on his own. According to that, one can not follow one's plans and intentions without having an evil aspect on one's side.

the master himself" (11). The Dwarf has no minor parts (in Swedish: *delar*) in himself. Yet he is able to take part and compete with other substantial elements in different complex entities.

To understand correctly the Dwarf's ontological status, one must not forget that his part of participating in the greater and more complex beings is an indissoluble one. Not one of the figures depicted in the novel (with one exception) can get rid of him or control him. The exception is obviously the Renaissance scientist and savant Maestro Bernardo.⁴ Unfortunately, he must also pay a high price for his resistance to the Dwarf. His immunity to evil is tantamount to insensitivity to goodness. The Maestro's stoic moral philosophy anticipates the modern science that both discovers penicillin and invents the atomic bomb. It disengages the fruits of its toil from the metaphysics of good and bad. Bernardo studies his fascinating inventions and the corpse of a convicted Francesco *sine ira et studio* meticulously. Others, however, have no power to completely rid themselves of the Dwarf. This pertains even to the Prince. After he discovers the Dwarf's malicious role in the plight of his family and country, the Prince shackles his servant in the dungeon and tortures him. The Dwarf, however, has no doubts about the Prince's future: "If I know anything of my lord, he cannot spare his dwarf for long. I muse on this in my dungeon and am of good cheer. I reflect on the day when they will come and loosen my chains, because he has sent for me again" (134). The human being must always succumb to the fearsome power of the Dwarf. The protagonist points to the fact that people try to separate evil from themselves. They believe its source should be found outside their own beings. They even try to repulse, jail, and punish it. Nevertheless, according to the Dwarf, it is a gross misunderstanding and an ontological mistake: "I have noticed that sometimes I frighten people; what they really fear is themselves. They think it is I who scare them, but it is the dwarf within them" (18). One cannot expel the imminent element of evil that persistently resides in the depths of every soul. The Dwarf often accentuates that he is an independent and homogenous creature.⁵ This however cannot be said about the others. The protagonist discloses the true ontological structure of their beings: "they are afraid because they do not know that they have another being inside them" (18).

⁴ Mjöberg says that Bernardo's character has been inspired by the Italian philosopher and scientist Leonardo da Vinci (Mjöberg 1951, 168).

⁵ I disagree with the point made by Rikard Schönström in his essay on the sight of evil (in Danish: *Det ondes blik i Pär Lagerkvists Dvärgen*) (Schönström 2003, 221). My ontological polemic finds its support in a more literature oriented study by a Polish scholar Katarzyna Szewczyk-Haake (2017, 265).

Now, having depicted the internal uniformity of the Dwarf's stature, let me move forward to the picture that Plotinus' *Enneads* give on the nature of good and bad in the world. One can find some intriguing affinities and also striking discrepancies between the two ontological views found in Lagerkvist and Plotinus.

In the first of his six *Enneads* Plotinus explores the problem of the existence of evil in the world. In his dedication to the Platonic mode of doing philosophy, Plotinus points out that "those enquiring whence Evil enters into beings, or rather into a certain order of beings, would be making the best beginning if they established, first of all, what precisely Evil is, what constitutes its Nature" (Plotinus 1956, 66). In other words, in order to give a viable explanation of evil's presence and operation in reality, one needs first to say what evil actually is. This however must be done by having recourse to a definition of "good." For that reason Plotinus continues by saying: "If the solution is that the one act of knowing covers contraries, and that as Evil is the contrary to Good the one act would grasp Good and Evil together, then to know Evil there must be first a clear perception and understanding of Good" (66). Why is it so? Plotinus believes that „the nobler existences precede the baser" (66). To him it is self-evident that the good has priority over the bad.

Let us then have a look at the nature of the good. What sounds chiefly interesting in this investigation is that Plotinus says that an entity can "be made up of parts." Nevertheless, even then its "appropriate, natural and complete act" (64) must express that which is the best part of the entity, since then it is the good that has an overwhelming power over the entity, no matter how scant and meager the good part of being is. Due to the ontological structure of reality the best part of an entity is always constitutive for the whole. Plotinus does not stop here. He draws from this claim the ultimate conclusion. The good part of a being will always prevail. Any entity that consists of a good and bad part will be eventually dominated and possessed by the good. To Plotinus the good is the highest Intellectual-Principle that "possesses all [...] and what It possesses is still Itself, nor does any particular of all within It stand apart" (67). If so, if there is nothing particular, nothing separated or heterogenous to an entity, then "every such particular is the whole" (67). One can conclude that good is the force that does not let any particular part of an entity stand out.⁶ With no particularity within an entity, the homogeneity has been saved. Now, it seems to be clear why Plotinus

⁶ In Second *Ennead* Plotinus says that "the Good, the Principle, is simplex" (II.IX.1). The Greek expression is there: ἀπλῆ φύσις—"of a simple nature" that may be understood an undividable one.

says that good is virtually the only part of the being itself. Here the famous theodicean debate commences. Plotinus comes to the conclusion that “evil cannot have place among Beings or in the Beyond-Being” (67).⁷ His final statement is a precise antipode to the Dwarf’s confession. Plotinus and Lagerkvist’s Dwarf start their investigations from the idea of the homogeneity of a being. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that both of them at last impose homogeneity not only on a singular entity, but on the entire reality. The former says that good is the only thing that really is; the latter claims there is nothing real but evil in the world.

2. Impenetrability

In the next step I want to explore the problem of limited access to evil’s core. In fact it poses an alarming question as to whether all the ontological investigations on evil have not lost their credibility. The Dwarf presents his nature as an impenetrable phenomenon. Having agreed upon that with the protagonist, one needs to admit that a philosophical speculation on evil has a very narrow scope.

When reading the novel one can become perplexed by the fact that all the characters, but one, have their proper names.⁸ For the most part their meanings introduce some knowledge of a person. One is informed about the later Princess’s religious fervency by her Latin derived name *Teodora*. The Prince’s animalistic name *Leone* is a symbol of his sovereignty and power. *Angelica* makes us think about her serene, angelic nature. *Fiammetta* represents the sparkle of sexual desire and her craving for power. Nevertheless, the Dwarf has no proper name given in the book. Having comprehended the Biblical act of giving names to objects as a distribution of power and knowledge, one must acknowledge that there is no power and no knowledge accessible to humans in the case of evil. Towards the end of his diary, the Dwarf makes it clear when he says ironically: “Power over me! What does it matter if I sit here in the dungeon? What good does it do if they clap me in irons? I still belong to the castle just as much as before!” (Lagerkvist 1973, 127). Although he was sentenced to life imprisonment, there is no chance to get rid of him. In point of fact nobody can penetrate his nature. Hence nei-

⁷ I have considered and analyzed Plotinus’ train of thoughts more extensively in: Pucydłowski 2019, 27-46.

⁸ I am very thankful to my brilliant student Agnieszka Kocik PhD. She pinpointed that issue in a stimulating discussion during a seminar on evil at the Pedagogical University in Krakow.

ther judicial control nor custody of him is possible. The Dwarf admits it is even better that people in fact do not know what they are coping with. There is too much terror in it. He says: "Who knows anything about the dwarf soul, the most enclosed of all, where their fate is determined? Who can guess my true identity? It is well for them that they cannot, for if they did they would be terrified" (82).

What is then the Dwarf's understanding of knowledge? His idea of perceiving and recognizing objects in the world should be found as very different from the classical tradition of European metaphysics. The protagonist declares: "It is difficult to understand those whom one does not hate, for then one is unarmed, one has nothing with which to penetrate into their being" (7). It is hatred that lets us keep the object of cognition at bay. Perceiving reality is a brutal struggle. To know something means to attack and hurt it. Therefore, evil assails people, but not vice versa. People do not have enough potential for hatred to fight back against evil. The Dwarf is also skeptical towards human attempts to reach the sky and gain universal, cosmic insight. He wonders about the scholars embarking on their astrological venture: "Who knows anything about the stars? Who can read their secret? Can these men? They believe that they can commune with the universe, and rejoice when they receive sapient replies. They spread out their star-maps and read the heavens like a book." Nevertheless, the Dwarf has doubts about it. He understands that their reading is a pure solipsism that gives no real grasp of the matter: "they are the authors of the book, and the stars continue on their shadowy ways and have no inkling of its contents" (9). In comparison to astrology his idea of perceiving reality is earthbound, humble and strictly limited. "I too read in the book of the night, but I cannot interpret it. My wisdom shows me not only the writing, but also that it cannot be interpreted" (9). The knowledge is very limited. Enquiring brings more questions than answers. Evil is impenetrable. However, the Dwarf is apparently the only one who can know evil. It is because solely the protagonist is able to hate not only others, but also himself. He exclaims: "But I hate myself too. I eat my own splenic flesh. I drink my own poisoned blood. Every day I perform my solitary communion as the grim high priest of my people" (17).

Another thing that the Dwarf can easily get through to are bad inclinations in humans. The protagonist well knows his path to the heart of temptation that afflicts the Prince's soul. First of all, "A dwarf always knows more about everything than his master" (11). That means that the Prince's servant can disclose to his master not only the vices, sins and betrayals of others, but he also brings out the ruler's dormant but menacing desire for destruction.

Having murdered the Prince's closest friend, the Dwarf says about his lord: "I can guess his desires before they have been uttered, perhaps before he has formulated them to himself, and thus I perform his most inaudible commands, as though I were a part of himself" (86). Although evil is impenetrable to the others, it can certainly penetrate their souls with ease.

Having presented the Dwarf's idea of cognition and penetration, it is worthwhile to compare it now with the view on knowing held by Plotinus. The dissimilarity is striking. Plotinus says: "All knowing comes by likeness" (1956, 66)⁹. This is an entirely different way of proceeding. In the Dwarf's eyes the recognition of any object is viable if and only if the object is heterogenic to the subject of cognition. Since knowing is a struggle, there must be some hostility between active knowing and passive being known. This hostility is based upon an ontological dissimilarity. That rule, however, is not applied in Plotinus' philosophy. According to the ancient philosopher one can get anything from another only due to the former's recognition of their likeness. This recognition is anchored in the act of love and affirmation of the other.

Now a paradoxical affinity between Lagerkvist's Dwarf and Plotinus emerges. They both claim evil is impenetrable. The former links knowledge to control and hatred. He claims that due to the lack of knowledge there is no control over evil at all. The latter understands knowledge as an act of assimilation and love. For that reason, evil has no "Ideal-Forms" and Plotinus asks triumphantly: "who could imagine Evil to be an Ideal-Form, seeing that it manifests itself as the very absence of Good?" (66). This statement has some profound ethical consequences. Not only must the nature of a bad deed be found illusionary, but also the deed itself, called vice, turns out to be a mirage in the end.¹⁰ To Plotinus there is nothing there in the cleft of evil that stands between people. He would even say that there is apparently no murder, rape or violence. A rhetorical question is asked: "But what approach have we to the knowing of Good and Evil? And first of the Evil of soul: Virtue, we may know by the Intellectual-Principle and by means of the philosophic habit; but Vice?" (74). What baffles us when reading Plotinus is that evil has no carnal, literal or painful manifestations in the world. Instead of experiencing it with the senses, one can only abstract it in metaphysical speculation. Ploti-

⁹ For more details of what role likeness plays in the process of knowing and the theory of representation in Plotinus see: Schroeder 1996, 336-355.

¹⁰ Dominic J. O'Meara underscores in his *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* that "moral evil is secondary and dependent on metaphysical evil, which is primary" (1995, 84).

nus says: "this thing which is nowhere can be seized only by abstraction" (1956, 74). Contrary to that, Lagerkvist burdens his reader with a picture of the brutality and tangibility of evil. Although the Dwarf finds no pleasure in base rejoicing over the carnal nature of war and fighting, one gets a detailed but dispassionate account on illness, death and torture in his diary.

Nevertheless, Plotinus does not exclude the cognition of evil. Though it is unsubstantial and of an illusionary nature, one can turn to that. This however results in falling into the shadows, into unenlightenment. It is a choice of distracting one's cognitive powers. According to Plotinus: "The Soul that breaks away from this source of its reality to the non-perfect and non-primal [...] becomes wholly indeterminate, sees darkness. Looking to what repels vision, as we look when we are said to see darkness, it has taken Matter into itself" (69). As I will try to demonstrate in the last section, even to Plotinus there is still a danger in exchanging the light of knowledge of goodness for the darkness of evil.

3. Infertility

The metaphysical tradition often pays much attention to the origin of a being taken into consideration. The classics asked about the descent of matter, the human soul, good, evil, gods and even the entire world. The Dwarf's diary is tinged with philosophical reasoning of this kind. He finds his lineage to be a very important issue and he deals with that. It is also distinctive to him in comparison to the people at the court. However the problem of the Dwarf's genealogy is twofold. What matters is not only his ancestors, but also the offspring he could never bear. The Dwarf is sterile. Yet this is not exclusive to him alone. He says: "We dwarfs beget no young, we are sterile by virtue of our own nature." One can guess that infertility must be found a great disadvantage and a flaw to the dwarf race. The protagonist, however, is not troubled with that imperfection. What is more, he finds it one among the greatest proof for the superiority of dwarfs over other humans. "We have nothing to do with the perpetuation of life; we do not even desire it" (Lagerkvist 1973, 58). Sexual contact, pregnancy and birth, due to their carnal nature, are always found repulsive to the Dwarf. In point of fact he believes that there are people who work for dwarfs with services as a base as giving birth. In opposition to people, he says about dwarfs, "we have no need to be fertile, for the human race itself produces its own dwarfs, of that one may be sure. We let ourselves be born of these haughty creatures, with the same pangs as they. Our race is perpetuated through them, and thus and thus only can we enter

this world. That is the inner reason for our sterility" (58). The Dwarf is not ashamed of his illiterate peasant mother who, as he recalls, "turned away from me in disgust when she saw what she had borne, and not understanding that I was of an ancient race." There is no filial respect and gratitude to her, since she sold her dwarf baby and "was paid twenty scudi for me and with them she bought three cubits of cloth and a watchdog for her sheep" (9). The protagonist finds her a useful instrument of transmitting life and bringing about a new dwarf personage in the world. Yet he is not thankful. As I will demonstrate in the next section, to the protagonist life has no value at all. Begetting offspring is devoid of any metaphysical depth. Contrary to popular belief, to the Dwarf it is in no way a multiplying of God's creation. One needs also to point out that evil embodied in the figure of the Dwarf is not independent in its coming into the world. It is not substantial in a metaphysical sense. There is no power for it to be born or created. The Dwarf must wait for a whim of fate, for a genetic mutation that accidentally gives him a chance to exist. However, this unsubstantiality does him no harm, because he is firm in believing that the human race will perpetually need dwarfs and will constantly give birth to them.

The very same problem is discussed by Plotinus in the first of his six *Enneads*. It seems that Plotinus and Lagerkvist's Dwarf agree on the fact of evil's infertility and unsubstantiality. Nevertheless, their valuations of that are extremely different. The protagonist of Lagerkvist's prose is proud of his absence from the disgraceful process of giving birth. Although he is aware of his lack of independence in coming to the world, he accepts the human role of procreation. A metaphysical reading of that may say that living at someone's else cost is not an imperfection. An entity that can employ some other beings to sustain its existence would prove its highest merit. The conclusion is that the entity supersedes the other beings by the act of enslaving them. It makes them its servants. In the case of the Dwarf, it is particularly interesting. Though he is treated by humans as their varlet, in his opinion it is the human race that has been enslaved by dwarfs.

To Plotinus everything looks very different. The good is superior to the bad for "the Good is that on which all else depends, towards which all Existences aspire as to their source and their need, while Itself is without need, sufficient to Itself, aspiring to no other" (Plotinus 1956, 67). To be sufficient to itself means to have the ultimate power to generate itself with no need for external resources. A metaphorical depiction of evil given by Plotinus confirms its total unsubstantiality: "Some conception of it would be reached by thinking of measurelessness as opposed to measure, of the unbounded

against bound, the unshaped against a principle of shape, the ever-needy against the self-sufficing: think of the ever-undefined, the never at rest, the all-accepting but never sated, utter dearth” (68). According to Plotinus evil is comparable to a parasite. It lives and feeds on a being of the other nature. It will never survive without its host. Unfortunately, the coexistence of evil and its carrier is not a peaceful symbiosis that contributes to the reciprocal benefit of the two involved. It is not even a reasonable exploitation that means to deprive the host of energy, but to keep it alive. This relationship is always the annihilation of the host in the irreversible evil’s drive to destruction. Plotinus gives here a philosophical account: “the negation of Good, unmingled Lack, this Matter-Kind makes over to its own likeness whatsoever comes in touch with it” (69). That phenomenon of making over to one’s own likeness is a negative counterpart to the Hegelian term of *die Aufhebung*. Everything is sublated, but simultaneously, contrary to Hegel, nothing has been preserved. Evil aims relentlessly at its own extinction.

4. Absurdity

Having read Lagerkvist’s novel extensively I can come to the final passage. The coda is the theme of life’s meaning and absurdity. The Dwarf realizes how much his human fellows appreciate all their businesses, efforts and life’s fuss. As a remark on that he says: “Everything has a meaning of its own, all that happens and preoccupies mankind. But life itself can have no meaning. Otherwise it would not be. Such is my belief” (Lagerkvist 1973, 26). The Dwarf’s conclusion shocks the reader. The lack of meaning is, to employ the idiom of Leibniz, a sufficient reason. Things can go on only because they have no sense at all. Their existence is pointless and for the very same reason it is real. The Dwarf mocks all the lofty metaphysical systems. Leibniz and Hegel have been turned upside down. The only asset of life is its futility: “What would life be like if it were not futile? Futility is the foundation upon which it rests. On what other foundation could it have been based which would have held and never given way? [...] Futility is inaccessible, indestructible, immovable. It is a true foundation” (35). The symmetry between the Dwarf and Plotinus is striking. The protagonist of Lagerkvist’s novel employs the terms that in *Enneads* were earmarked for the good. Plotinus said about it: “That only can be named the Good to which all is bound and itself to none. [...] It must be unmoved, while all circles around it, as a circumference around a centre from which all the radii proceed” (Plotinus 2001, I.VII.1). Plotinus compares the good to the sun and makes it a central

point of his metaphysical panorama. The Dwarf, however, finds not the good, but rather the futility in the Archimedean point of reality. If so, the final of his consideration of life is very pessimistic: "Life! What is the point of it? What is its meaning, its use? Why does it go on, so gloomy and so absolutely empty?" (Lagerkvist 1973, 123). One is reminded here of the famous Hobbesian phrase: "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

To the Dwarf there is no important reason to keep all the people around him alive. He asks with passion: "Why should they exist? Why should they revel and laugh and love and overrun the earth? Why should these lying dissemblers and braggarts exist, these lustful shameless creatures whose virtues are even viler than their sins?" (89). Obviously, he finds no satisfying answer to that question. Hence murder is a viable option. Moreover, death is the only thing that people actually deserve. The Dwarf's rule says that the sufficient reason for their existence is their redundancy. Therefore, the natural fulfillment of their lives is to let them perish with no hope for eternal existence. This is the hex he repeats as he brews his poisoned beverage: "For after my drink they forget all the beauty and wonder of life and a mist enfolds everything and their eyes fail and darkness falls. I turn down their torches and extinguish them so that it is dark. I assemble them with their unseeing eyes at my somber communion feast where they have drunk my poisoned blood, that which my heart drinks daily, but which for them spells death" (89).

5. Freedom

On one hand the picture painted by the Dwarf in his diary is terrifying and depressing. On the other, the metaphysical vision of Plotinus has an uplifting and calming effect on the reader. He elevates his reader and calms him down. Moreover, it virtually cuts out the poignant problem of evil. It seems that both the Dwarf and Plotinus assert their metaphysical conclusions with an inviolable certainty. The penetrating analysis of the principles of reality finds respectively the good or evil primordial overwhelming power that triumphs over an individual human being. Nevertheless my question is: do Lagerkvist and Plotinus leave any space for the moment of freedom in their complex and complete systems? I dare to say, yes.

I have already adumbrated the Dwarf's awkwardness and embarrassment as he faces a human soul's ambiguity. The incongruence of man is a puzzle. The protagonist has no insight into love, friendship, sexual desire, childlike joy of life, music, dance, poetry or science. Those phenomena re-

main vague in their descriptions. Sometimes he tries to reinterpret them, for example the Dwarf finds some of Maestro Bernardo's investigations useful at war. Therefore he appreciates Bernardo's art. Nevertheless the protagonist has no real understanding of what Maestro's wisdom is. His comprehension is rather superficial. It falls prey to the Dwarf's own mistrust and prejudices. Although upon being awoken from a nightmare he declares "reality is the only thing that matters" (41) his understanding of reality is very shallow. One reason for that is the Dwarf's ontological simplicity, referred to above as homogeneity. A tangled nexus of human passions, affections and desires is too complex for the Dwarf's simple ontological nature.¹¹ When he claims boldly that „human beings are too feeble and exalted to shape their own destiny" (127), one must agree. This, however, does not mean they are fully steered by the Dwarf's evil in themselves. The inconsistency of human nature is the last bastion of opposition, and it is quite an invincible one.

There is however another danger that emerges out of Plotinus' metaphysics. A perfect ontological system permeated with the ever victorious power of the good leaves no space for human misery. A tragic individual fate must succumb to the overwhelming strength of the good. One needs to capitulate. To embrace Plotinus' metaphysics is to find suffering and vice an illusion. This happens contrary to the most intimate feelings of every human being. In my opinion, however, there is still much that depends upon human freedom. The very act of accepting the metaphysics of the good is a clear manifestation of freedom.¹² One is free to find the central point of reality either in good or in evil. Plotinus confirms it by saying: "Now as, going upward from virtue, we come to the Beautiful and to the Good, so, going downward from Vice, we reach Essential Evil" (1956, 76). He also points out

¹¹ A very similar conclusion is drawn by a famous death of God theologian Gabriel Vahanian in his analysis of two Lagerkvist's novels: *The Dwarf* and *Barabbas*. Although he declares: "it seems wrong to attribute to Lagerkvist a dualistic apprehension of the world and life" Vahanian then says that we cannot "assume that Lagerkvist's analysis leans towards a monistic understanding of reality. [...] The darkness that pervades so many of Lagerkvist's novels is, thus, always dark enough to let the reader catch a glimpse of the light on the other side of human existence" (Vahanian 1964, 196-197).

¹² A vital distinction has to be made here. An act of accepting or rejecting the metaphysics of Plotinus is a clear manifestation of human freedom. This however is not tantamount to the freedom Plotinus meant. For that reason my point is rather to say that modern philosophy can decide whether it embraces or not the metaphysics of good, than to mean Plotinus himself offers such choice. In other words: Plotinus implies, but does not admit it. The issue of discrepancy between post-Kantian and Plotinus' idea of autonomy and freedom has been commented by Pauliina Remes in her *Plotinus on Self: The Philosophy of the 'We'* (Remes 2007, 190).

what kind of consequences each of the choices has: “from Vice as the starting-point we come to vision of Evil, as far as such vision is possible, and we become evil to the extent of our participation in it. We are become dwellers in the Place of Unlikeness, where, fallen from all our resemblance to the Divine, we lie in gloom and mud” (76). To dwell in the world of the Dwarf or that of Plotinus is a matter of individual choice. No force can compel one to make a particular choice. Philosophy and literature sketch only the horizon of events and fate that would follow an individual will.

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