

# Once more about the Evil

This essay is based on a passus (actually a digression), which was included by Jan Sokol into his book *Člověk a Náboženství* (Man and Religion, Portál 2004, p.217 ff). It is extremely compact and bears great significance, therefore I am going to quote it here (in my translation) as a whole:

## **Digression:**

*"The evil" as an overall concept for everything, which opposes man, which bothers and molests him and which mars his efforts, has been in the world at least from the time when the man learned to designate it. Of long also, people have been asking where it comes to world from. Ancient cultures hesitated poised between two stances: whether to exclude the "evil" somehow from the sum of the (good) world and to attribute it to an "evil demiurge", to a hostile daemonic deity, or to show on the contrary, that there was no substance in the evil, that it didn't exist independently and that it was in fact only a lack of good. Both answers have however their weak points, and so human thought still wavers between the first and the second one.*

I can't spare myself a short commentary to the first paragraph: Sokol's characteristics of the essence of evil is actually very clever, truly phaenomenological, because it bonds the "evil" together with the man and makes it dependent on human perception! And it virtually makes the asking about the origin of evil superfluous. If only people had admitted such or a similar definition of evil, they would have had to say that the evil in the world arises from themselves!... But let's leave Jan Sokol still for a while to develop his argument without interrupting.

*In the first case (manichaeism) is the world substantially split and it presents itself as a scene of conflict of two equipotent powers or deities, which makes them of course limited, while in the other case the "evil" casts its shadow also on the world in its whole and subsequently on its (eventual) maker, too. We see that in the first case gains the "evil" perhaps too much attention, while in the other it appears to be glossed over and trivialised, which may be typical for self-content ages of bliss and optimism. The worse tends then to be the disillusion.*

*Cultures and religions we have mentioned here chose mostly the second way retaining the dualistic, "manichaeic" concepts only selectively, as a strange element. Monotheist religions have hardly another option. Thus however for them the real problem remained pending. When and where religious experience was still strong and intense, they could have been by answered referring to God's authority and rebuffed as illegitimate: "Woe to him, who dares to strive with his Maker - shard among shards of clay!" (Is 45,9) „O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter?“ (Jer 18:6) O man, who art thou that thou talkest against thy God? (Rom 9:20)*

*Such an authoritative rejection and refusal goes uneasy together with the concept of God's immediacy or even friendship, which is being ever and anon stressed and potentiated by biblical religions.: "You are my friends" are Jesus' words, by which he addresses his disciples before his death. (J 15,14) And thus, wretched individuals turn to God with their complaints or even reproaches, from which in modern ages a theoretical problem arises: If God is so fond of people and of the world, why does he submit them to pain, humiliation and death? Why does he permit such horrors and disasters to happen, even to innocent people? There is obviously no answer to these questions and every human attempt to find a "solution" will definitely get ensnarled into arguments of its own: a man, who wants plead the cause of God?! This is the paradox of theodicaea, of the philosophical attempts to justify our world and its Maker.*

*These difficulties issue from the very core of monotheistic religion, whereas it hangs on one omnipotent God, who is the, of course, also responsible for everything. This may be the reason, why modern theology sometimes invokes God's weakness, which is however a really vague, paradoxical, hardy conceivable idea: in what sense can be the Creator and Redeemer of the world weak? Similar ideas may easily decline and become a mere sentimental ballast: "None of us is responsible for anything." Such a way leads nowhere. But there seems to be one more option to take: We can inspect the very notion of "evil", and analyseor "deconstruct" it.*

*The principal difficulty may be in the very notion of "evil", more concisely in its outwardly self-evidence and in the emotive power of its horrific samples - e.g. from recent times - which draws one back from analysing the notion critically. But until this has been done, there is no sense in asking e.g. where the evil comes from. In order however, to avoid general and abstract discourse of this kind, which has been circling around one and the same spot for centuries now, lets aks in another way: Where can be true, undisputed evil found?*

1. *First there are objective matters: famine, pain, illness, death. Man fights them according to his abilities. A physician soothes the pain and postpones death, but simultaneously he understands well, that it is most likely a part of life, too: Living things differ from the dead ones exactly by that fact that they can starve, they can feel pain and die or perish practically in every instant. This is, all the same, a very abstract and general view, while death is always a singular, often really tragic event. Death of a close friend or relative always destructs something, even in the case if the deceased*

- one has managed to acquiesce to it. This example shows nicely, how the singularity of human self does not mean isolation, but exactly the opposite - relationship, friendship, love.
2. There must be however drawn a strong line between natural death that couldn't have been averted any more and killing, pain, or death by another agent - another man: murders, wars, extermination camps. They are "evil" in another sense than the death itself. These things have something to do with cruelty and terrorising, with envy and vengeance, with contempt and degradation, with ravaging and vandalism. It might be said that they are deliberately evil, that their hatred is aimed at somebody. They are the subject of the fifth commandment - "Thou shalt not kill!", which has been properly extended by Jesus to cover also offence and despise (Matth 5,22).
  3. The third type of evil is characterised by its coolness and impersonality: egoism, ruthlessness, greed, indifference, cowardice. What joins them together is not real malice, but the fact that they do not take the other seriously in his dignity; the other man doesn't mean anything for them and has no value. The victim just had the bad luck to have been used as means to achieve its goals (or had stood in its way), otherwise it would have had nothing against it. As a matter of fact, also concentration camps and "psykhushki" from times not very long ago would belong to this group, being cool, organised, even mechanic liquidation of people.
  4. Finally, there is the last distinct type of evil, which is not violent, but focuses on singular people could comprise keeping not one's word, faithlessness, fraud and lie. This type of evil violates human relations and undermines general trust in the society. In contrast to the previous type, it can reach only those, who have been "duped", i.e. who have relied themselves on something, who have trusted something or somebody. Due to this very reason, it may seem particularly disgusting to any morally sensitive or honest people.

Even this rough and vague distinction shows how an unreflected notion of "evil" is too general and too "autocentric", that is to say based on subjective views. It comprises everything which I do not like or which annoys or encumbers me. But such things needn't be evil: a person I have clashed upon concerning something is surely an obstacle for me, but it would be absurd to consider him/her "evil" just for that reason. The latter days have taught us to handle with general terms - eg. those of truth or the good - cautiously; the more wariness is needed with the concept of evil.

Our preliminary analysis shows too, that from the four types of "evil" only the latter three are evil as such, probably because they issue from the souls of humans and from human society. Wealthy modern society has reached a considerable success in fighting the first type of "objective evil", poverty, pain or death, and that namely thanks to technology and modern organisation of society. The worse threat to us are the remaining categories of purely "human evil", especially if they get organised.

We see, that Jan Sokol, knowing that to get a unified view of "evil" is extremely difficult and that any of considered models get stuck soon or later in contradictions, tries to view "the evil" via self-constructed categories, to which a common subjective experience of evil can be with some consensus divided. His main guideline is purpose and intentionality, which may be (or may not be) hidden in an act or process which has been labelled as "evil". As a true evil he recognises only intentional acts of evil, deliberately performed by someone - his categories 2-4. Further important difference lies in the fact, whether we - as someone suffering evil - have been aggressively targeted and hit by someone's hatred, or whether we have been just considered a tool or measure, or hindrance to somebody's (evil) aim. (Cat 2-3) Only a slight inconsistency can be observed with Sokol's last category. Although I can understand very well what things the author imagines to be contained in this category, I am still not particularly able - with view to its intentionality - to tell it apart from the third category. Nobody lies only for pleasure (if so, it would be a kind of a playful mystification, altogether not evil). You can find - here and there - a person who deliberately pulls leg of his or her neighbours, just to show off, a certain Münchhausen or Gulliver, but these are usually quite harmless lies and even the tricked ones may afterwards laugh at them... Lies and perjuries serve practically without exception to dark private purposes, to greediness, strife for power, or vengeance... Sokol's fourth category is therefore not different by the measure of intentionality, but by its *quality*. (It is characterised by the author as *non-violent* evil, but this is not satisfactory: many of crimes covered by previous categories can be perpetrated - at least in their introductory phase - noiselessly and without violence, too.)

But if we come back to the characteristics of evil which appeared at the very beginning of the article (an excellent characteristics!), we can see, that there was originally no such difference in view in our primeval understanding of the fact of "evil": "The evil" is always "evil" and pain is always pain, no matter whether it is caused by a malignant cancer or by a weapon in someone's hand. To consider its intentionality is important from the point of view of morality, but we have not come that far yet. Let's try now to view Sokol's categories from a slightly different point of view, from the point of view given by our experience and to categorise, what kind of experience we can have (or the way we "suffer") in a particular type of situations. This will render us a slightly modified set of categories:

1. The first type of "evil" to be labelled here is that, what is directed against our very existence, what is trying to destroy us, to remove, to kill us. This is, of course, death and a pure aggression directed against us in sense of Sokol's Categories 1 and 2. Life is doubtless the most valuable thing we have on earth; therefore any attack on our life is perceived rightfully by everyone as "evil". This situation has been satisfactorily described by Sokol himself.

2. In the second place should come that what is directed against and destroys conditions necessary for our life. Here is the place for famine, economic crime, impoverishment, expulsion from home, that is a lot of that what Jan Sokol has in his third category. And it should be stressed that these deeds are virtually not aimed personally at ourselves, but "just" at our possessions, our homes, it is interested in our money, our furniture, and even maybe - our gold teeth. And because we are humans, who depend on such things, also these actions can lead to our death. It is a kind of evil which is far more brutal, massive and - of course, how Sokol has put it - mostly absolutely impersonal. That makes it seem to us also more heinous than open hatred and direct aggression. But we must include here also matters of unintentional nature: Our life conditions can be destroyed by a volcanic eruption or another natural disaster, too.
3. But what I am going to place on the third place is not among Sokol's categories. It could be tentatively called "ignorance". It is everything, what hinders us in true knowledge of the world and in orientation within it. These are often subject-based conditions - a psychical handicap, low degree of intelligence, but also laziness, or insufficient will to get at knowledge. On the second place herewith should be included everything what tries to baffle us and tries to prevent us from closer knowledge: inaccessible schools, artificially unanimous ideology - including Sokol's lie and deceit. Sokol's remark that in such cases we must have been somehow "duped", from which issues indirectly that some part of the guilt lies back upon us, doesn't seem to me much to the point. There are situations - on one hand - where we really do not have another option but to rely on the single source of information, which is available at the moment. (How many "goodwilling" people only believed in communist ideology!). On the other hand, it is my opinion that nobody should be too sceptical and suspicious towards the reality and to other people in particular. Methodical scepticism may be good for a certain type of science, but it works destructively in human relationships.

We have viewed the human so far as an immanent being with no time dimension - but any suffering and misery is always actual. So we must now take under consideration also this aspect of human being, its temporality and realise that it produces other types of frailty, to which are humans exposed. One of these can be tentatively called

4. "separation from roots". It is everything what sizes from the individual the "soil under his/her feet": deliberate destroying of cultural tradition, hiding the truth about someone's real origin, expulsion from home etc. But destroying of our natural environment applies here, too, together with everything what turns us to "orphans on the face of the earth", what takes from us our past, and thus also any possible orientation. It's clear, that this type of evil strikes most at children and young people - a person who has had already a considerable life story behind possesses a certain amount of experience as well, which constitutes his "cultural memory" that cannot be easily taken from him or her. This reveals also the immense importance and cultural value of "religious old wives", or story telling grannies.
5. If seizing his or her past from someone is an offence, which we rightfully perceive as suffering and evil, the more stupendous crime must be, if someone or something is trying to seize someone's future from him or her and the hope for it. It could be called a sin against the Holy Ghost. But we have to do here with two things. There is hope, and hope touches more that facet of the soul of ourselves which enables us to tread forward and face the future and has immediate influence on our disposition and capacity to deal with the future, on our imagination, on our will to do and accomplish something, while the metaphor about seizing the future does not mean only destroying of someone's hope, but also destroying conditions for possible development towards the future. A teacher who sacks a student from school (an example which is Jan Sokol particularly fond of) undoubtedly changes objective conditions for his/her future development. That such a change needn't have only bad consequences is patent. If such a change should be considered really evil it has to contain another element still. I think, a term borrowed from psychoanalysis would serve us well here - an idea of *castration*, which I understand as preventing from future development, destroying of the - subjective or objective - conditions, upon which the individual is capable of further development and of reaching his/her maturity, or even a kind of self transcendence. Also this type of evil affects mostly young people, because they have still a "long future" before them and there is still a lot "at stake" about them. On the other hand young people are more resilient to such wrongdoings and can hold out against it with a certain success.

A remark: A difference must be made between the act of entire baring somebody the way to the future and *obstacles* on such a way. These can be to large extent of a natural kind. Life itself arranges them in our way and it knows well what it is doing, because we learn in this way to overcome them. They are so useful, that if they are too few, teachers or educationists must hasten to make some additional/artificial ones for us. What I have tried to grasp here, are not obstacles which are a test to our strength, virility of the innate flame inside us, which drives us forward, but something which is directed against the substance of this capacity of ours, against the very flame of life, which puts it out and spoils that, in which our true humanity lies, which "drives the Spirit out of his temple". For this reason, I didn't hesitate to call it sin against the Holy Ghost.

6. All previous types of evil and suffering, which have been named already, may be - in their extreme, pronounced form - very painful, even if they may be effected by unintentional motives, too. (We may also lose

our home or possibility to future development by an unpredictable bad chance, without any active human intervention.) The last two types I am going to mention lack this degree of acuteness, nonetheless they can have really disastrous effect. Every man's life on the earth together with the conditions and knowledge necessary for it, based on cultural tradition and with prospects and ambitions aimed at the future results and fructifies itself in his or her work. Everyone has his or her own type and style of work and everyone's honest and sincere work has a big value. Preventing somebody from doing his or her work, or in presentation of its results to the community, so that he or she himself or herself as well as the other can benefit from it, is certainly bad and such a motion impairs the "total balance" of the world. It is obvious that here an enormous number of factors come into play, which are absolutely independent on anyone's will - various social trends and mechanisms, including the "market" ones. All the same, it is bad, if someone is made to sit idly with hands folded, or write "just for the diary". We are surely not inhabitants of an ideal society and there is no power on earth which could provide for everyone to be able to come into his or her own, but we should be concerned about it. We should be care for how the potential of people coming to this world could be used and put to work. Anyway, we have nothing more precious and serviceable to enhance the future development of the earth with.

7. The last type of evil I want to show here is somewhat akin to the previous one. Man has been provided with the desire for freedom. Maybe it is due to the fact that our ancient ancestors lead nomadic life or due to something else, but especially at these modern times everyone feels a strong motion towards freedom and need of it. That is he has need of being independent and self-motivated in his doings, that all his doings should emerge from his own private motives and decisions and was not imposed on him from outside. Nobody can be entirely happy if he/she is not free. Everything which is aimed against our freedom is therefore evil. There are hundreds of examples for demonstration of such statement, but - and that is really interesting - all of them have an "intentional" nature. No natural power and no law of the nature strips us of our freedom. We are well adapted to them and without them - e.g. without the appropriately measured gravitation force - we wouldn't be able to live. Let's just remember how comical the movements of astronauts on the surface of moon look. And no pioneer in the middle of wilderness, who has to struggle every day for his bare life fighting the weather or wild beasts would say that he lacks freedom. A grievous infringement of our freedom can be brought about only but other people - or by the whole society. On the other hand - we need other people, we need the community. Be it so that we might be able to be technically independent on the others, such a thing is against our nature. Our need for freedom leads to natural tension with our another need, need for communication with the others. It is self evident that a lot of "evil" in this sphere may be caused by ourselves and our own imprudence. But that is not what the essay is about. Apart from the possibility that we ourselves rashly throw off our freedom, or on the contrary, renounce our social bonds through an ill premeditated deed (we can rashly throw off even our life) there are always powers in the world which work deliberately against us and attempt to enslave us, or at the opposite - drive us in isolation from the other people. And this is the last type of evil which I present her, without a serial number. Still I would like to stay a while with it. We can be also driven into isolation surely by a certain physical or psychological handicap, e.g.- autism. But such movements or "waves" are effected by humans, too. It can be demonstrated well on girls' friendships: "Daisy is funny, we won't talk to her." And this Daisy surely suffers from it. It is much worse when such ostracism gains an organised social hue. We needn't go far for (terrible) examples from quite recent past or even present. The symbol of the Jewish star is known all over the world, and be of a little swarthy complexion, with a lean face, a big nose and maybe a little curly hair is no characteristics that would open you door everywhere. And - this is rather an academic remark - such ostracism would be monstrous even if the Jews had had to suffer nothing more than just the stars!

I have arrived in my typology to the number seven, even though it should be properly eight. But I liked to stop at seven. They are other "principal sins" (sin it is always, when any of these types of evil is caused deliberately) than the traditional seven. The difference lies mainly in the fact that the traditional ones were constituted with respect to an individual sinner and his self-injury, which he perpetrates by sinning; while here we have adopted the viewpoint of pain and suffering by which we may harm others. In the light of Jesus' greatest commandment, they are of no lesser importance.

It has been known for long that the evil is somehow connected with sin. (Christian theology gives a strong reflection of this fact.) We have thus made a circle back to the beginning: If the evil in itself is bound to humans and originates practically through their perception of reality, it also comes into being analogously as sin through their infringement of the reality. This needn't be viewed upon as a kind of metaphysical speculation - Sokol's deconstruction, which I have tried to extend a step or two further, renders us plenty of material to be able to see, how, by which means we may cause pain to others, pain which is afterwards rightly perceived by them **as evil**.