

The Symbolism of Evil in the Concept of the "Servile Will" in Paul Ricœur: From the Experience of the Fall to the Duality of Misery and Pain

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Abstract:

This article offers a philosophical analysis of the symbolism of evil within the concept of the "servile will," approached through a hermeneutical reading of the Adamic myth in Paul Ricœur's thought. It argues that the myth is not merely a religious account of original sin, but rather a symbolic system reflecting the existential predicament of humanity, suspended between freedom and necessity, good and evil.

The discussion examines how the possibility of evil is embedded in the very structure of human existence, through an exploration of fundamental dualities: freedom and will, finitude and infinitude, strength and weakness. It also emphasizes Ricœur's shift in the discourse on evil from the theological question of its "origin" to the ontological question of "how" — the coexistence with evil as an essential dimension of human experience.

The article further articulates a vision of a renewed ethics founded on an "ethics of fragility," which acknowledges human weakness not as a cause for shame but as the basis of solidarity and compassion, and as a possibility to transform evil from an obstacle into a catalyst for moral creativity.

Keywords: Symbolism of evil, servile will, Paul Ricœur, constitutive fragility, fallibility.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

*"The possibility of evil is inscribed in the constitution of man"*¹With this foundational statement, Paul Ricœur defines the ontological predicament of the human being, whose existence is inseparable from the possibility of moral downfall. He does not present this notion solely as a theological claim but as the cornerstone of a "philosophical anthropology" that investigates the essential structure of the human, characterized by a profound contradiction between the pursuit of good and a fragile constitution vulnerable to deviation. Within this framework, the central inquiry arises: How can freedom — the highest expression of human dignity — simultaneously constitute the fundamental source of evil and sin? And how does the Adamic myth, as a universal symbolic paradigm, provide the key to understanding this existential paradox?

This article approaches the problem of evil through a hermeneutical methodology grounded in Ricœur's seminal work *The Symbolism of Evil* (*La symbolique du mal*). The analysis moves beyond a superficial reading of the myth as a religious tale of an initial "fall" and instead engages its multilayered symbolism, interpreting it as a mirror of the human existential condition marked by "constitutive fragility" and radical "fallibility"². The figure of "Adam," or the "servile will" — granted freedom and dominion by the Creator yet bound by his own will — embodies the deepest expression of this paradox. It affirms that "man is the point of emergence of evil in this universe"

To pursue this aim, the article follows Ricœur's trajectory through four principal stages of analysis. First, it examines the "language of confession" as the only symbolic discourse capable of expressing evil, where evil emerges through terms such as "defilement," "servitude," and "sin," which signify it indirectly and metaphorically. Second, it considers the Cartesian notion of "finitude," which positions humanity, in Descartes' words, as "a midpoint between God and nothingness", thereby creating the ontological ground for the possibility of

error. Third, it explores the dimension of "tragicity," where evil appears as the lived reality of suffering and misery — extending beyond the individual agent to collective human experience. Finally, it addresses the possibility of "reconciliation" with evil through the hermeneutical interpretation of symbol, which does not seek to justify evil but to understand it as a fundamental human condition, thereby opening a horizon for an ethics that embraces fragility without yielding to it.

This research does not revisit Ricoeur's conception of evil; rather, it offers a novel, interpretative reading that renews the connections between the myth of Adam, the concept of the dominant slave, the duality of misery and suffering, and the ethics of vulnerability. It is supposed to underline that evil is not only a structural possibility of the will but also a privileged space for the emergence of renewed moral creativity. Connecting the anthropology of fallibility proposed by Ricoeur to a more articulated reading of the human narrative, this essay argues that human vulnerability is not only - and certainly not merely - a condition of our susceptibility to evil, but also the medium through which responsibility, solidarity, and forgiveness are formed. It is an exacting philosophical approach which delves into the depths of human existence - depths where the search for the roots of evil is intrinsically a part of the quest for redemption.

2. Symbolic Displacement and the Birth of Evil in the Experience of Adam (peace be upon him)

Paul Ricœur, in his inquiry into the meaning of the human being as fallible, affirms: "*The possibility of evil is inscribed in the constitution of man.*"³ This means that evil is something encountered; the relation to it is defined only as a situational struggle. It represents that which ought not to exist, yet whose existence cannot be explained — for evil is intrinsically

human, and its source lies in the very condition of humanity, which becomes the sphere of its manifestation. Ricœur underscores the issue of specific finitude, not as a result of human participation in nothingness, but rather because the human being is not identical with the self. The notion of disproportion between self and self-fulfils the ontological demand of human truth, since it is precisely this disproportion that constitutes the “degree of being” in humanity. This particular statement, it should be understood as an admission that evil is not conceived as an isolated instance, but as a structure of interpretation at the core of self-formation itself, —that is to say, as a sign of internal rift that makes every individual a permanent object of reinterpretation rather than merely a carrier of guilt.

If there were no confession, evil would still persist; yet without language, confession would not exist. The manifestations of evil are revealed through a discourse known as the language of confession. This language is symbolic, compelling the individual to speak of evil and, in so doing, to confront the risk of error. It does not address sin directly but rather through indirect, metaphorical expressions. Consequently, the deciphering of symbols becomes necessary in order to access the meaning conveyed by this language. *“In the confession of sin, there is something dreadful and impenetrable, something that makes Gnosticism the constant inclination of thought, and a mystery of injustice that harbors the false notion of original sin like a symbolic tongue.”*⁴ The role of symbol lies in its power to open the way to multiple interpretations, directing thought toward the self. The attempt to interpret these symbols is, in itself, an act of self-openness: the analysis of hidden dimensions and the release from the chains of sin that constrain the individual. On this reading, the confessional discourse, in turn, firstly becomes an interpretative practice of the self also, while the self does not only describe evil, rewriting its relation with evil, thereby establishing the possibility of having a discourse on free responsibility, as opposed to theological blame.

Augustine, however, proposed another perspective on sin. He argued that God created humanity and also created evil; thus, the responsibility for guilt does not rest on humanity alone. "Augustine constructed a purely moral vision, wherein man bears complete responsibility. He derived this from a tragic vision, where man was no longer the maker but the victim of God, who established him for Himself, were He not severe."⁵ However, our interpretation of the symbolism of Adam is apt to move the emphasis away from the "inheritance of sin" to the "structure of human action," that is, to see Adam as the interpretative ancestor, who in his image captures the meeting point of limited freedom and the possibility of deviation, instead of seeing him as the individual who passes on the invariable sin to his successors.

Augustine placed the contrast between evil will and the conditions of environment. What the Adamic symbol conveys — above all — is the affirmation that, even if humanity is not the absolute origin, it is nevertheless the point of emergence of evil in the world. Evil is not a thing, nor matter, nor substance, nor a world of its own; it has no independent nature. The Adamic symbol affirms that humanity is the point of origin of evil in the universe, and that Adam is the cause of transmitting sin into the human condition. Sin, in this sense, is a heritage handed down by the first being created by God to his descendants — the initial instigator in the transmission and diffusion of evil.

The emergence of evil has both a human and experiential source: "The enigma of the servile will — that is, the free will that binds itself and finds itself always bound — is the ultimate content of the symbol that provokes thought. To what extent does the symbol, still bearing a contemplative quality and tied specifically to evil will, remain capable of being the object of 'reflection'?"⁶ This reference to the servile will illustrates how methodological questions that

have been transcended remain inseparably connected to doctrinal concerns. Here arises the necessity of addressing the ethical vision of the world as an ongoing attempt to understand freedom and evil in continuous relation. Yet to approach evil through the lens of freedom is a perilous decision: it is to enter the problem of evil through its narrowest gate, by presuming evil to be fundamentally “human, experiential.” In this case, the ‘enslaved will’ can be understood as a will that is capable of acting but is limited; that is, a will that is cognizant with what is good but is unable to actualize it. This attribute is more than a theological interpretation as it has ontological-ethical implications.

Understanding evil through freedom constitutes the very movement of freedom that acknowledges evil, whereby freedom recognizes itself as responsible for evil and identifies evil as an act committed. This confession binds evil to humanity, not only as the site of its manifestation but as its agent — the one whose action generated the problem. Evil is not a destination reached, but the very starting point. “Even if freedom must be the agent of evil without being its radical origin, confession places the problem of evil within the sphere of freedom⁷.” For if humanity is not responsible for evil except by way of abandonment, by a form of participation on the opposing side, from a source of evil more radical than freedom itself, then precisely this confession of responsibility allows access to that radical source. It follows from the above that our distinction between the philosophical and theological treatment of the concept of ‘enslaved will’ depends on the making of the recognition of the evil act into a foundational moment for the consciousness of freedom itself, not merely a step on the way to the justification of the doctrine of salvation.

Human freedom is not the exclusive origin of evil, and “it is not only true that freedom is the cause of evil; rather, the confession of evil is the condition of the awareness of freedom. In this confession, one may discern the subtle articulation of past and future, of the self and its acts, of non-being and pure act within freedom itself. Such is the greatness of the ethical

vision of the world." On the one hand, evil emerges in the world insofar as humanity posits it; on the other hand, humanity posits it only because it has succumbed to the exploitation of the adversary. The human being revealed in this symbolism (the symbolism of evil) appears less as guilty than as victim.⁸ Therefore, in our opinion, the 'enslaved will' is not just the 'bad will,' but the 'double will': the responsible, active will, as well as the will that is a victim of its own vulnerability and the 'adversary's' pressure. This opens the way to the notion of the 'ethics of vulnerability' as a critical reaction to the aforementioned structure.

Despite the intertwining of numerous figures within the Adamic myth, the focus remains firmly on the act of the first human on earth — Adam. His deed is portrayed as a passage from an innocent spirit into an evil one. His wrongful choice of the tree from which he desired to eat represents a slip into evil, an act instigated by a woman. In this act, Adam's fragility becomes evident. Thus, various mythic motifs converge in the shaping of the Adamic myth, often referred to as the myth of the fall. Among these motifs is the myth of seduction, where Satan adorned the tree for Adam and appeared in the form of a serpent, and the myth of wrongful choice, in which Adam chose the forbidden tree despite the abundance and diversity of fruits surrounding him in the Garden of Eden. This mythical monument enables the reading of the Fall as an experience of vulnerability as opposed to the simple act of disobedience; the act of Adam opens the boundaries of human capabilities to the direct experience of the dualistic misery/suffering that will be analysed through the existential expansion of the Fall.

The symbolism of evil begins by bringing myth closer to philosophical discourse, and "the enigma of the ruler — that is, the free judgment that binds itself and always finds itself bound — is the ultimate content of the symbol that provokes thought. To what extent does

the symbol, which has a contemplative quality and pertains to evil will, remain capable of being the object of 'reflection'?"⁹ What connects myths to knowledge is the interpretation of the symbols of evil.

The Adamic myth unveils the obscure face of evil, and Ricœur devoted his analysis to disclosing the symbolic dimensions of myth through the interpretation of this concept. The myth reveals the condition of every human being as implicated in evil, and humanity's past is characterized by evil. The will is entirely captive to sin, since the symbolism of Adam represents the point of emergence of evil in the world. A single sin entered the world through a single man. Sin is not equivalent to the world itself, but it enters into it and takes root within humanity. In this respect, Ricœur asserts: "The Adamic myth reveals — at the same time — the obscure face of evil, in the sense that each of us has it within his hands and inaugurates it, and each of us finds it in himself, outside himself, and prior to himself."¹⁰ The myth, therefore, carries the dimension of the origin of evil; it discloses the truth of every human being. Hence, it crystallizes in the figure of the ancestor of humanity all these characteristics: the reality of sin that precedes all consciousness, the collective dimension of sin that resists reduction to individual responsibility, and the incapacity of the will that encompasses every present error. Our contribution in this regard is the consideration of this 'origin' as a structure that goes through a process of self-renewal in each and every age through the reproduction of the same patterns of evil, and not as a moment that is past and over, thereby utilizing the 'symbol' as a means of understanding the structural links in the relationship of freedom and evil and fragility, and not a means of understanding the event of the initial point of that structure.

By considering the Adamic myth solely from this perspective, its counterpart is overlooked — namely, that Adam's sin and disobedience were not the only reasons God expelled him from Paradise, which consequently led to his descent to earth with his progeny. Rather, the

expulsion was a punishment for his failure to obey and comply with divine commands. To hold the view that, had Adam not erred, all humanity would still be enjoying Paradise is simplistic, for God's primary intention in creating humankind was to populate the earth and appoint man as His vicegerent upon it. Adam retained full freedom both before and after his sin. He acknowledged the transgression he had committed, admitted that he deserved the punishment decreed by God, and bore the consequences of his disobedience. Therefore, God expelled him from Paradise to the earth upon which humanity dwells today. This Quranic dimension integrates the possibility of distinguishing between philosophical and theological interpretations without their contradicting one another: whereas the religious discourse insists on the wisdom of management and punishment, our philosophical reading insists on how a free and fragile self-forms, which will then be developed within the framework of an ethics of fragility as a renewed approach toward the confrontation of evil.

3. The Existential Transformation — The Fall as a Foundational Turning Point in the Formation of the Concept of Evil

Throughout his intellectual trajectory, Ricœur sought to establish a vision of the will, in which he defines the modes of the emergence of evil by examining the reciprocal relationship between the voluntary (*volontaire*) and the involuntary (*involontaire*) in the possibility of evil's occurrence. Yet knowledge of reality is mediated and cannot exist or unfold without such mediations: humanity lives in a quasi-ontological tragic condition, both practically and emotionally. From this standpoint, Ricœur asks why the human being falls into error (evil). The reason lies in human nature: "that is, the absence of any existential harmony between what man aspires to and the actual scope of his possibilities."¹¹ From our point of view, this 'inconsistency' between ambition and possibility represents the deep

structure of what we will later call the fragile self; that is, a self which is defined not only by what it wants but also by what it is unable to attain, so that the possibility of evil forms part of its ontological constitution rather than is simply a moral incident.

The problem posed by evil is that it is a phenomenon of violence, an open wound of pain, striking at the very core of hope for a better life and a more authentic existence. The source of this problem lies in emotional fragility, since the human being is weak¹². Evil can be expressed only through symbols, for Ricœur insists that the means of confessing evil are indirect, metaphorical transformations drawn from the ordinary sphere of experience. However, when the symbols of evil multiply, they lead humanity from the mere possibility of falling into evil to the actual commission of evil, with immediacy and ease, at any given moment. It becomes clearly observable in this case that these symbols do not have the function of simply describing Evil, but they actually influence our very experience of it, and the more images of Evil there are in our imagination, the more opportunities there are for them to be actualized, which comes very close, in an interpretation sense, to the level of language and practice.

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricœur demonstrates that evil cannot be grasped directly through its expressions and effects. This implies that "evil" requires interpretation and hermeneutics in order to be understood.¹³ Nevertheless, interpretation becomes a universal necessity, for in the absence of direct meaning, evil appears, for Ricœur, in another form: "evil is symbol." He encapsulates this insight in a famous phrase: "From the desert of criticism we wish that a voice might once again call out." And if that voice is to be heard, the desert of intellectual labor must first be crossed: the desert of renewed doubt and faith.

Ricœur established that symbolism does not speak directly of defilement, sin, or guilt; instead, it employs indirect and metaphorical language. "Symbols, for him, are signs with a double meaning that refer us to the true meaning¹⁴." Symbolism thus opens an expansive

field of interpretation, within which hermeneutics seeks to dispel illusion, to disclose the concealed forces hidden within symbolic forms, and to probe the implications that such symbols carry. Consequently, any analysis of evil remains incomplete insofar as it does not become an analysis of those invisible forces that are innate to the symbols and makes critique of the evil, by its very nature, a critique of discourses that reproduce and normalize it within individual and collective consciousness.

For Ricœur, evil became the pathway through which to expand the field of inquiry into language, for language is affirmed as a central source from which multiple symbolic forms arise. Interpretation, according to Ricœur, serves to explain and unravel every linguistic enigma, no matter how profound. Symbol has thereby opened a multitude of avenues for the expansion of meaning and the proliferation of interpretation. The project of Ricoeur on evil is thus situated within a greater project in the philosophy of language: to understand evil means to understand the linguistic forms that express and encompass it; hence, the hermeneutics of evil cannot be separated from the hermeneutics of the text and of the self.

In *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Ricœur emphasized the importance of hermeneutics and his attempt to deconstruct the notion of original sin derived from myths and gospels. He declared: "I am neither a dogmatist nor a historian. What I very precisely wish is to contribute to what I would call what is said to be an interpretation (dogma) of the doctrine of original sin." The concept of original sin, as a dialectical construct and a defence of religion, signifies that evil is not a substance that exists, nor does it possess being or nature, for it originates in humanity and is the work of freedom. This leads to the possible differing philosophical interpretation of the "enslaved will," which is no longer "the inevitable result of the first sin in

the metaphysics of sin," but is rather "the expression of the limitation of human freedom in a history of actions that shape and reproduce determinate patterns of evil."

The sin confessed by humanity is less than the act of offense or the evil deed; sin constitutes an embedded destiny. As reflected in the idea of Gnosticism, false knowledge and rational semblance rest upon the same interpretation of evil. And because evil is "a thing and a world," myth itself becomes "knowledge." From here, the Gnosticism of evil embodies a realism of the image, as well as the transformation of symbol into a world. "Thus, was born the dogmatic mythology most fascinating to Western thought, as well as the most beguiling intellectual deception, which took the name: Gnosis¹⁵." But this Gnostic analysis enables us to point out another aspect of our inquiry: when the sign becomes a 'closed world' where everything is explained, evil is tacitly legitimized, and hermeneutics gains a critical role consisting of bridging this closure and rebalancing the openness of meaning.

What compels inquiry into the truth of symbols through evil is that it renders myth a fertile ground for the establishment of understanding. For Ricœur, "symbol gives rise to thought." He employed the symbol in diverse semantic forms. The phrase "symbol gives rise to thought" indicates that everything has already been spoken enigmatically, yet the task remains always to begin anew and reconsider the horizons of thought. Therefore, the study of the symbolism of evil not only seeks to interpret what myths have to say, but also to liberate the mind to re-evaluate ethical problems from the basis of a modern human experience which does not accept any pre-fabricated answers.

Hence, Ricœur's preoccupation with symbolism took the form of interpreting symbols. He introduced a hermeneutical dimension into reflective thought. As he states: "I could not have spoken about evil will or about evil without some kind of hermeneutics.... My first subject compelled me to investigate the structure of symbolism and myth.¹⁶" He therefore confined hermeneutics, in this case, to the interpretation of symbolic language. Symbolism requires

hermeneutics because it is built upon a semantic structure — a structure of expressions with double meanings. There is likewise a hermeneutical demand because there is an indirect language. Thus, hermeneutics consists in disclosing indirect meanings, in uncovering the hidden significations of symbolic language, and in connecting them to written language and texts.¹⁷ Exactly here comes Ricoeur's analysis of the evil will in our project on "the ethics of fragility," because every interpretation of the symbolic language of evil already contains an interpretation of the self as capable that opens the way towards the reconstruction of moral responsibility on the grounds of fallibility rather than its negation.

From the perspective of Ricœur's research on the problem of evil (*Mal*), which remains one of the fundamental guiding threads of his thought and of the hermeneutics of symbols (*Symboles*), evil is conceived as "the obscure shadow of the will, which cannot be subjected directly to objectification except through interpretation, or through a specific hermeneutics of the symbolism of evil." In this way, Ricœur found the true entry point into hermeneutics. He also remarked: "Symbolics and hermeneutics were known under other terms; on the one hand, symbolism calls for hermeneutics, and conversely, there is a hermeneutical problem, because there is indirect language, and thus hermeneutics is defined as the disclosure of indirect meanings."¹⁸ Thus, one can say that Ricoeur makes evil a gateway to hermeneutics itself: since the evil is 'a vague shadow of the will,' any attempt to understand it will, in essence, be an attempt to understand how does the will is recognized through this shadow, that is, through what its particular fragility reveals.

Modern philosophy has confronted the problem of evil as a pervasive reality, surrounding human life on every side and engaging it in a continuous dialectical opposition. Ricœur observed that evil is universally rejected, yet it coexists in parallel with the line of good.

Wherever one is present, the other accompanies it. If either is removed, existence becomes incomplete. Therefore, it is necessary to coexist with evil and to attempt to tame and domesticate it — if one may use such an expression — in order to align it with the psychological demands of human beings and thereby diminish the suffering it causes. Yet this task often proves difficult, given the vast expanse of human history and the long persistence of evil as a lived reality that cannot be ignored or dismissed, for it frequently produces consequences of tragic magnitude. Thus, the notion emerges that living with evil means not accepting it, but working on interpretative and ethical approaches that will make it possible to transform the presence of evil from a blind fate to an occasion of re-thinking the justice, solidarity, and responsibility concepts that will, afterwards, open the path to the notion of the 'ethics of fragility'.

A/ Fallibility — The Ontological Possibility of Sin

The possibility of moral evil is inscribed in the constitution of humanity. The problem of evil is thus bound to human awareness and to the extent of recognition of the act that arises from freedom and choice. Humanity alone suffers this condition, which has invaded its world — whether ontologically, doctrinally, or mythically in symbolic form. For this reason, humanity is fallible; it cannot be infallible or immune from sin, no matter how great the effort to avoid it. This leads Ricœur to ask: What is the point of origin of evil? What is the nature of the possibility of evil? And what is the structural locus of evil? Methodologically, the present research traces the internal logic of three fundamental anthropological dichotomies in Ricoeur's work. The freedom/will dichotomy reveals the transition from the simple general capacity to act ("I can") to the act of specific decision ("I want"), that is, to the domain where the will can restrict itself in a way that contradicts its own norms. The limitation/illimitation dichotomy generates a state of "disproportion" between what a person aspires to and what they actually possess, producing an excess of desire that constantly threatens to exceed their

limits. The strength/weakness dichotomy reveals the will as a fragile capacity: capable of initiating action, yet simultaneously vulnerable to failure, temptation, and self-betrayal. These three converging dichotomies form the structure of the "enslaved will" as a prerequisite for the possibility of evil: a formally free will, but in reality constrained.

Answering these questions inevitably requires an examination of human awareness of error and the degree of acknowledgment it entails. This acknowledgment is grounded in choice and will, for each individual possesses the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, by virtue of rational faculties and moral sensibility that make discernment possible. Such discernment takes place when inner human awareness — that which is called conscience — is present. Conscience drives a person to experience remorse and dissatisfaction after committing an act later condemned by the self. At times, when actions conflict with moral values, this conscience urges the person toward uprightness and away from practices once embraced.

Conscience consists of a set of experiences that ground the understanding of human behavior and render the individual responsible for conduct and ethics. It is not shaped solely by internal personal values, but also by the dignity of the individual within society, the environment, and the community in which one is raised. Society possesses its own laws — unwritten yet transmitted and perpetuated across generations — which individuals acquire through interaction and engagement with others.

This human awareness is often accompanied by pangs of conscience and by the sense of duty to cultivate moral behavior within each person, in order to preserve inner peace and psychological tranquility. Such emphasis has been affirmed by the heavenly religions, despite their diversity and differences. When the human soul is sound, only then can justice

be realized, and the individual becomes incapable of wronging others, transgressing against them, or committing the errors to which inner evil once impelled him. Human awareness may thus be likened to a scale that regulates correctness and distances the individual from error. It enables discernment and distinction between that which must be upheld and that which must be rejected and renounced.

B/ Fallibility and Finitude — The Ontological Foundations of Human Weakness

Since the finitude of creatures constitutes the initial condition for the emergence of moral evil, this finitude merits the designation “metaphysical evil.” “Not every limitation is a possibility for error, but it is the specific finitude which, with respect to human reality, implies its non-coincidence with itself¹⁹.” Descartes could have declared: “I am like the midpoint between God and nothingness,” meaning that not every composition of being and non-being constitutes an opportunity for error. For every reality that does not establish itself fully as being is situated “between God and nothingness.” In this way, he sought to exclude the hypothesis that humanity is endowed with a positive capacity for error, affirming instead that human beings are composites of being and non-being.

It is this “constitutive fragility that made evil possible.”²⁰ Through the concept of fallibility — that is, constitutive fragility — philosophical anthropology, in a certain sense, encountered the symbolism of evil, while the symbolism of evil brought myths closer to philosophical discourse. Through this concept of fragility, the doctrine of humanity approaches the threshold of rationality, where it becomes intelligible that evil “entered the world” through humankind. Beyond this threshold begins the enigma of emergence, which admits only of indirect and symbolic discourse. In this manner, the symbolism of evil extends the mythical dimension raised by the voluntary and the involuntary.

Human beings are by nature curious, and it is this curiosity that drives them to seek the truth of evil, for evil is less a theoretical abstraction than the embodiment of human action. The infiltration of evil into the world occurred because of human fallibility, fragility, and acceptance of the state of evil, coupled with the conviction that humanity is not immune from error. When the soul weakens, evil gains mastery; any loosening of reason marks the beginning of entry into the realm of evil.

It has been observed that the destiny of humanity lies in a middle ground between the demand for happiness and the inevitability of nature and death. Yet in the sphere of ethics, this "in-betweenness" acquires particular significance. As Aristotle remarked, between extremes of poor taste in the aesthetic domain, one does not necessarily posit a contrary poor taste, even though one may form an idea of taste along the lines of *la critique du jugement* (the critique of judgment), without reverting to such opposition.²¹ For this reason, "ethics attempts to address the question of the 'education' of man through a scientific methodology, and what education here means is the cultivation of taste." Accordingly, an organized ethical process cannot emerge from a disordered foundation. Thus, a systematized ethical framework produces a morally sound human being.

Infallibility is nothing other than the possibility of evil, "and the methodological gap between the phenomenology of fallibility and the symbolism of evil is merely the expression of a gap within man himself between fallibility and error. The symbolism of evil benefits from a great turning, at the end of which it becomes possible to resume the interrupted discourse and to restore the teaching of symbolism."²² It thus indicates the locus and structure of a reality whose weak resistance provides a domain in which evil can reign.

That humanity falls into error as a result of weakness means that human judgments remain relative in their estimations. Fallibility represents this weakness — the inability to resist — for man is fragile before himself; he is incapable of absolute steadfastness. Indeed, “the concept of fallibility refers only to the shock of returning the acknowledgment of existing evil to the description of human finitude. This is correct, for error is what cuts off its own possibility and casts it as its shadow upon the original finitude of man, thereby revealing it as susceptible to error.”²³

From this perspective, the corrupted condition of the human heart cannot be denied. One may observe the intersubjective structure of respect that shapes the difference between consciousnesses, and through misunderstanding and falsehood, the original structure of speech, resemblance, and the otherness of consciousnesses becomes unveiled. In this way, fallibility may be regarded as the condition of evil, even though evil, conversely, is the revealer of fallibility.

The essence of what distinguishes humanity in its innermost being is a constant orientation toward something beyond itself, something external: “To treat man as a closed system involves a mistaken and distorted interpretation. In reality, the being of man concerns an openness to the world, that world rich with other beings which he must confront, and filled with meanings he must realize.”²⁴ From this it follows that fallibility cannot be detached from the world; it constitutes the condition for the very existence of evil. If it were claimed that humanity were immune from error, one would be compelled to admit the existence of good without its opposite in the world. Yet reality imposes fragility, which means that human beings live amid the conflict of passions and desires, compelled to meet needs and satisfy longings, while remaining limited by capacities and opportunities dictated by the external world.

The theory of fallibility therefore entails the possibility of evil in a more positive sense. The disproportion inherent in humanity is precisely the capacity for error — that which renders man capable of committing mistakes. As Descartes affirms: "If I consider myself as somehow participating in nothingness and non-being, that is, insofar as I am not the supreme being, I find myself exposed to an infinity of failures, to the point that I am not surprised when I err."²⁵ Descartes explains this by recognizing that in contact with the causes of error he is rendered more vulnerable to the various mistakes that confront human beings in daily life. To the extent that he perceives the multitude of scattered errors committed here and there, the matter ceases to astonish him; it becomes ordinary. This ordinariness arises from the capacity of human beings to engage in diverse actions and to meet the manifold requirements of life. In these endeavors, one may act rightly or wrongly. In either case, the individual bears the burden and consequences of the actions performed, since he is their author. All such actions are preserved within human memory, to be recalled later with their full detail — along with the pains and struggles they inflicted either upon oneself or upon others.

As Ricœur affirmed, man is by nature inclined toward error. This inclination arises from his fragility and fallibility, which propel him toward error and thereby subject him to pain and sorrow. At the same time, human memory remains susceptible to forgetting, provided that the individual is capable of seeking pardon and forgiveness. Such forgiveness, however, is attainable only if one possesses a generous spirit, capable of rising above what has occurred. Moreover, forgiveness can only be authentically granted when offense has taken place — that is, forgiveness is intrinsically tied to the wrongful act itself. It springs from the innermost

self, governed by a spirit of responsibility that impels reflection upon happiness and directs the individual away from the causes of pain and sorrow.

The finitude of man is the condition that renders evil possible, and fallibility, like wavering, guides the passage from weakness to temptation and from temptation to the fall. Evil emerges from human finitude through the continual transformation of wavering. This transformation — from innocence to error — disclosed in the very condition of evil itself, confers upon the concept of fallibility both its ambiguity and its depth. Fragility is not merely the “place” of the emergence of evil, nor simply the “origin” from which humanity falls, but also the very “capacity” of evil.

Thus, when it is said that man is errant, it signifies that the specific finitude of being does not coincide with itself. It is this original weakness from which evil arises. Humanity bears within itself the property of weakness and thereby remains vulnerable to error. This weakness is the source of evil, which brims with love of pain and tragedy, clinging to man wherever he is found. For evil can arise only when humanity exists in a condition of weakness that enables its birth, producing a fragile soul incapable of resisting the evil that emanates from it.

4. Existential Tragedy — Misery and Pain as a Consequence of Evil

Human existence in this world is in itself a challenge. Man is constantly exposed to the risk of error, and there is no means of absolute escape. At the same time, he seeks happiness, which is regarded as a universal aspiration. Yet the path to happiness is obstructed by evil, which generates experiences of pain and misery arising from the depths of the inner self. When the origin of pain is invoked, reference is made to its causes; when its effects are discussed, reference is made to the consequences of misery and suffering. It is certain that misery and pain are subjective and emotional phenomena — always mental and internal in character. Indeed, misery and pain are not merely inner states, but subjective conditions comparable to

love, hatred, despair, and suffering; they possess no existence apart from the human self. In this sense, misery and pain can be understood not only as an external punishment, but also as an inner experience that reveals to oneself the limits of one's ability to achieve the good, he seeks; in other words, they constitute the emotive aspect of the division which evil has caused within the very structure of the will.

Misery and pain originate in the fall into evil, which is an ontological reality that cannot be denied. From the beginning of his existence, man has sought to free himself from evil and spread goodness as the path toward happiness. Yet reality situates him in a conflict between two poles: one that he loves and pursues, which is good, and another that he resists, which is evil. The latter produces numerous consequences, among them misery and pain. "Man is capable of two things: right and wrong, good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly."²⁶ Here, the correlation between suffering and consciousness seems close because the more there is moral indifference, the less the voice of conscience exists, and the more the capacity for suffering exists; on the other hand, the consciousness about the limits of pleasure and the effects of pleasure upon oneself and others turns into the start of resistance against the evil that causes this suffering.

The misery of humanity arises from indifference toward the errors committed and, consequently, from ignorance of the true motives that have led to error. "Yet moral good triumphs in the end over moral evil."²⁷ As is well known, the ultimate aim of man in this existence is the attainment of happiness, which stands as the antithesis of evil. Happiness transcends mere pleasure. For this reason, Paul Ricœur distinguished between pleasure and happiness, offering a profound study of both, given that they are boundless concepts within human existence, surpassing the limits of reason.

The feeling of happiness arises when man seeks to achieve pleasures that enable him to enjoy his life, whether permitted or forbidden. Here Ricœur maintains that feeling is the privileged medium that guides humanity toward happiness, identifying human conscience — or psychological awareness — with the very concept of feeling. From this perspective, happiness is understood as being subject to the authority of conscience, which regulates the paths by which the individual arrives at it. Thus, happiness entails living free of repression and deprivation, attaining self-sufficiency, and reaching the ecstasy of pleasure sought by man — without succumbing to deviant behaviour which, in most cases, results in misery and pain. Here, the connection between suffering and awareness seems close: the more the moral indifference, the weaker the voice of conscience, the more the possibilities for the suffering, while the awareness of the limits of pleasure and its effect upon myself and other people turns into the beginning of resistance against the evil, which brings the suffering.

Kant began by excluding happiness from the inquiry into principle and morality, placing it within the domain of desire and aligning it with self-love. He writes: "The awareness of a rational being of the enjoyment of life, constantly accompanying his existence, is happiness. And to adopt happiness as the highest principle for determining free choice is the principle of self-love."²⁸ To be happy is, necessarily, the aspiration of every rational and finite being. Yet the moral principle demonstrates that happiness constitutes an ultimate destiny, not the mere fulfilment of individual desires. In this sense, happiness becomes a whole, not a sum of scattered satisfactions. Within its horizon, the partial aspirations and fragmented desires of human life are severed and surpassed. This reference to Kant permits us to make a distinction between the reduction of happiness to the fulfilment of desire and the reduction of happiness to the general horizon of moral existence and is in accordance with the project of Ricoeur, who considers the confrontation with evil as being not the negation of desire but the interpretation of desire in a horizon of significance wider than utility.

Evil, however, inflicts pain upon man, disperses his thoughts, and exalts his desires and pleasures. The great religions speak of this suffering, particularly in the life after death, for evil drives man toward error, placing him in the position of the accused — making him regretful, burdened with guilt, and consumed by remorse. Herein lies torment: “the evil committed by one person finds its response in the evil received by another; at this great intersection point, the cry of lament is the loudest when man feels himself a victim of human deceit.”²⁹ Torment and pain are, therefore, nothing other than the consequences of human error, and punishment is the inevitable outcome of sin. For man possesses an innate faculty that enables him to distinguish between good and evil. “Evil committed” and “evil suffered” form a cycle through which the experience of misery becomes also and above all one of injustice, and from which the pain springs, not only from the knowledge of the sin committed by the perpetrator, but also from the experience of the sufferer himself, fallen into a net of negative actions he cannot control.

Sin inevitably imposes its toll upon humanity, for pain is the direct result of sin. “Suffering reveals its essential character as being receptive; we did not cause it, yet it befalls us. Hence the sudden variety of causes: the hostility of material nature, illnesses and ailments of body and soul, and the grief caused by the death of our loved ones...”³⁰ All of this stands as punishment arising from man’s commission of evil, experienced as pain imposed upon the agent. And if humanity cannot entirely eradicate evil from the self or from existence, then man must learn to coexist with it, under conditions that he establishes for himself — conditions through which he affirms his essence by renouncing desires, pleasures, and lusts that lead to sin, and by orienting his life in accordance with moral values. Out of this emerges the fundamental thought, which we will refer to later in “The Ethics of Fragility”: “To

live alongside evil does not mean to accept it, but rather to recognize the impossibility of eliminating it completely and to try to transform the reality of pain and misery into the incentive for oneself to build itself anew in the values of responsibility and control over one's desires instead of blindly submitting to it."

The misguided choice of action casts the self into the forbidden, for "the existence of evil means that a deficient human will has chosen wrongly and submitted to the voice of desire, casting aside the voice of truth that resides in its depths. Evil—here—is a departure from man and a rebellion against divine law, and this rebellion is the cause of evil, which exists only with respect to this evil man."³¹ This perspective articulates a profound vision of evil as the product of a deficient human will — one that chooses to submit to desire rather than heed the voice of truth. In so doing, evil becomes rebellion against both the moral order and the cosmic order. Thus, the existence of evil is not an absolute reality but is intrinsically tied to human choice, thereby placing full moral responsibility upon the free agent endowed with discernment. However, this 'imperfect will,' in our interpretation, is not seen by Ricoeur as a closed, fatalistic structure, but rather as a fragile structure which, through recognition and moral sacrifice, can become the point of departure for new forms of response to evil, and it is precisely here that the link between misery and suffering on one side and moral creativity on the other—as this research aims to crystallize—is created.

By 'ethics of fragility,' we do not mean an ethics that glorifies weakness or advocates submission to suffering. Rather, we mean a new mode of ethical reflection that stems from the structural recognition of the fragility of the human will: a will that is both capable and powerless, responsible and prone to collapse. This ethics does not require human beings to be infallible or immune to failure, but instead invites them to transform their awareness of fallibility into a source of strength.

5. CONCLUSION

From this in-depth analysis of the symbolism of evil in the figure of the "governing servant"—Adam—new dimensions emerge in the essential relationship between human freedom and the possibility of evil. It becomes evident that the myth of Adam is not merely a religious tale recounting the origin of sin, but rather a symbolic model reflecting the existential predicament of humanity: a being free yet bound by his own will, striving toward good yet always liable to fall into evil. This study demonstrates that evil is not a mysterious external force, but a possibility inherent within the very structure of human existence — a space between finitude and freedom, between weakness and will. The "fallibility" that characterizes man is not simply a moral defect but an existential condition, making him a being capable of both error and rectitude, both falling and rising.

The significance of Ricœur's analysis lies in his shift from the theological problem of the *origin of evil* to the ontological question of *how to live with evil* as part of the human condition. A symbolic understanding of evil does not justify its presence but equips us with the tools to grasp our dual nature and to accept fragility as a constitutive dimension of humanity. This acceptance does not imply surrender to evil; rather, it opens the way for ethical transformation.

In conclusion, this hermeneutic reading opens a horizon for a new ethics grounded in the recognition of human fragility — not as mere weakness, but as a possibility for humility, compassion, and solidarity in the face of evil. Evil cannot be eradicated, but it can be understood, lived with, and even transformed into a motive for striving toward good and justice. Perhaps the greatest freedom we possess lies in our ability to acknowledge our evils, confront them with lucidity, and rise above them through understanding and human solidarity.

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