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Morality and values in Pavel Vilikovský's *The Autobiography of Evil*

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Abstract:

*Morality is often referred to as the code of conduct of society. This code determines what is considered correct behaviour and enforces values society deems beneficial. Values themselves are protected by laws and social or moral norms. Authors combine all the mentioned concepts and convey them through the actions taken or not taken by characters. Their writings provide the reader with characters' motivations, reasoning and try to line them up with a final judgment – to see whether individual morals and values line up with the ones upheld by the rest of society. When dealing with morality in narratives of pain and trauma, the objective is then not only to analyse the protagonists' psyche but also consider societal pressures. The focus of our analysis lies in Pavel Vilikovský's novel *The Autobiography of Evil*, in which the author depicts morally sound characters becoming morally ambiguous while living in an oppressively authoritarian political system. Our aim is to explore the pain and trauma of Jozef K. whose moral core is affected by blackmail and threats. His actions are misguided and they perpetuate the cycle of violence instead of stopping it.*

Literature is a valuable tool for introducing morality and values to readers of all ages. They are inherently easy to recognize. The witch who tries to bake children in her gingerbread house is evil while the young orphan who saves the world from a dark wizard is good. And while morality can be as easy as classifying one's attributes as good or evil, the reality of the situation is that humans and the world they live in make ethical evaluation more complex. Values, on the other hand, can be found by answering a simple question: why does the character act in the way they act? What is their motivation? In other words, one is asking: what does the character value?

But what about narratives in which pain and suffering overshadow other subject matters of the story? An example dealing with complex moral issues on a very personal level can be found in Pavel Vilikovský's *The Autobiography of Evil*, more precisely, in the first part entitled "The short extreme loneliness of Joseph K". The story depicts the corruption of morality in a

society in which nobody can be trusted and deals with the protagonist's betrayal, blackmail and entrapment, which results in him kidnapping a young child, and after this act fails to improve his situation, he commits suicide. This study will focus on the changes in the protagonist's moral values as he struggles to find his footing in a battle with immoral government officials. Whereas at the beginning of the story he condemns immoral acts, after a few days under immense pressure, Joseph becomes what he hated by kidnapping and assaulting an innocent child. This decision was not an instinctual one; it stemmed from his inability to stop the government officials who were holding him and his family captive and was a planned act that began the protagonist's attempt to mirror the hold the environment had over him.

The basic synopsis could allude to romantic literature – the lone hero rebelling against society, fighting against fate, only to lose the battle and with it, his life. A problem arises with such a comparison – the romantic hero is usually characterized as a titanic, unforgettable figure, a force who can, at least for some time, stand toe-to-toe with natural or societal forces. Joseph K., on the other hand, is a deeply flawed human being who makes a series of extremely poor decisions and when cornered, takes his own life before his actions reap their consequences. The fact that the protagonist is an ordinary man is underlined by the author himself. Vilikovsky illustrates the protagonist's insignificance by stating that: "you alone, as you are, aren't interesting for us at all" and as the corrupt policeman explains further, Joseph's involvement was merely the easiest way to display dominance and infiltrate the revolutionary movement; capturing and entrapping Joseph and his family is "to show that we can do what we want in Austria or anywhere else" (trans. J.O.).¹ This contextualizes the main conflict and helps the reader understand the cultural norms and values. The author thereafter establishes that there is an overarching story that parallels the protagonist's personal struggle. The officer's primary goal is not to cause Joseph personal grief for his own amusement – it is a purposeful provocation; abusing a position of authority to gain cooperation.

The reader quickly learns that the authoritarian regime is being threatened by revolution, and a police officer has been tasked to detain Joseph and dismantle this threat. Joseph is instructed to trade his knowledge of and connections to the revolution in exchange for his and his family's continued survival. The exchange would seem cold and calculated, but Vilikovsky's policeman is not only a ruthless negotiator but also petty enough to taunt Joseph about being lured back into the country on false pretences. Vilikovsky's antagonist briefly reflects on morality, mocking ethics and packaging them with religion at the same time: "It's not right to lie, is it? Lying is a sin. By the way, we didn't lie; that Austrian policeman did and he can just confess later. Ten Hail Marys and he'll be clean as a whistle" (trans. J.O.).² This

piece of dialogue is interesting in the way author layers several ideologies into the string of sentences. The refusal to take the blame for putting a man in a situation where he has to choose between his family and his ideals, followed by a dismissal of the common ethical codex (as lying is generally considered to be an immoral act, with some exceptions), the effortless shifting of blame to a different entity (an Austrian policeman). The refusal to admit that immoral actions have consequences is also layered with the assumption that the Austrian policeman will not have a crisis of conscience and will easily move on with his life after absolving himself of the blame with a formal religious ritual, a meaningless prayer. If the reader takes the officer's words at face value, society's apathy will form an instinctively negative reaction. After all, a person would not want to live in a world where the police lies and entraps them in order to further threaten them into compliance. The reader's own moral values will very likely be in conflict with the ones presented in the story, making the reader more sympathetic towards Joseph's moral conflict.

Because morals and values cannot be separated from actions, the introductory question remains posed: What does the character value? By choosing to fight for survival and freedom instead of betraying his friends or beliefs, we could say that Joseph values life and freedom, both his and his friends'. Values can be classified in several ways, the most basic of which is simply "good" and "evil". There are more nuanced classifications of values which can bear "good" or "evil" characteristics: primary and secondary values, referring to a person's needs and wants; instrumental values, attributed to objects or traits that can attain something more valuable; and terminal values, which are a person's end goal. Positive values are then protected by norms. For example the value of life is protected by laws punishing people for manslaughter or murder. In addition, this vital value receives attention in religious teachings. In our cultural environment, this can be found in the Biblical Ten Commandments, more specifically the Commandment *Thou shalt not kill*. As religion and society in general are organized in nature, norms and values are shared and become generally accepted standards. Sen expands on the nature of the ideology this creates in society:

Shared norms can influence social features such as gender equity, the nature of child care, family size and fertility patterns, the treatment of the environment and many other arrangements and outcomes. Prevailing values and social mores also affect the presence or absence of corruption, and the role of trust in economic or social or political relationships. The exercise of freedom is mediated by values, but the values in turn are influenced by public discussions and social interactions, which are themselves influenced by participatory freedoms. (Sen, 2000, p. 9)

Vilikovský's society is corrupt and knowingly abuses or breaks moral and legal norms. A society cannot function without stability in law and morality and therefore, the breakdown in both Joseph and the policeman's morals do not gain them the results they want or need: "The success of a society is to be evaluated, in this view, primarily by the freedoms that the members of that society enjoy" (Sen, 2000, p. 18). For Joseph, his main drive is his freedom – regaining and keeping it. His resolve to take whatever actions necessary show that his "dark freedom" is not the ultimate value and in itself, it cannot be regarded as an objective good. The cycle of abuse stops at Joseph; while Vilikovský did not reveal whether Joseph was afraid to face the consequences facing him or simply refused to out of spite for the regime; taking his own life ensured that he technically remained free until the end, and as a by-product of his actions, the regime lost the opportunity to gain information about the members of the revolutionary group.

Before his suicide however, Joseph tries to fight fire with fire. The fact that the protagonist is not altruistic by nature is clearly spelled out during negotiations with the police officer; only now, he thinks he holds power and control over the situation: "In case you've forgotten, I wasn't the first one to bring children into this game. I was just inspired... And if your heart doesn't bleed over them, why should mine bleed over your daughter?" (trans. J.O.).³ In order to properly analyse this piece of dialogue, we need to establish how ethics evaluates a person's actions. Ethics has two main criteria for evaluating a human action. If a person is following teleological, resp. consequentialist theories, they are thinking about the results – consequences – of their actions. And so this branch of theory is based on intent and the aim or the end result of an action as the criteria for its evaluation (Gluchman, 2008). According to this theory, deciding to save a child from a burning building is a correct course of action. Interestingly, this decision means the action is correct even without taking the end result into account. The criterion was satisfied as the person acted with good intentions. The second branch uses a different criterion. People who follow rules, laws or other forms of norms – moral or legal – are committing actions which this branch of ethics evaluates as correct or good. These theories also cover the existence of an objective good. Spaeman believes in the existence of this good only in the relation between a human being and society (Spaeman, 1995). This means that any intrapersonal struggles have to be resolved according to subjective preferences in personal values. Therefore, Joseph's motivation to save himself at the price of another's person's freedom, using another person as an instrument to fulfil his own goals and breaking the law by kidnapping a small child all point towards the action being evil. Noticeably, his own conscience seems unaffected by his actions as he himself is in the exact same situation and is only taking actions that were used against him previously.

This reasoning can be supported by a branch of ethical theory, consequentialism, where the criteria for evaluating an action are its intent and result. Charles Pettit claims that a person acting according to restrictive consequentialist doctrine: “comes to learn in any instance that the best thing for him to do there is after all to break with the maxim, then he can have no ground for not doing so” (Pettit and Brennan, 1986, p. 445). Dissociation of reality from textbook-perfect situations can be compared to autopilot disengaging in emergencies: the human has to take over and decide how to solve the situation, as the pre-programmed scripts do not cover outlying situations. Pettit continues to add

Equally, if it becomes clear to the agent that the situation is out of the ordinary run, say because it involves some sort of emergency, then he must avoid an unthinking reliance on the general rule. The consequentialist satisfier is not wedded to his maxim; he espouses it only so far as it promises to deliver optimal results. Where that promise is withdrawn, he has no reason for remaining faithful. (Pettit and Brennan, 1986, p. 445-446)

Pettit uses saving time as a reward or “benefit” in his thought experiments, but in Vilikovský’s case, the stakes are higher, as the protagonist is risking not only his own life but potentially the lives, or at least safety, of his wife and children. The process of choosing the right path that aligns with personal values is open and Pettit cautions that the actor is held responsible for their actions, even if they were inspired by the environment: “He must ask himself whether he ought to preserve or promote this or that trait or motive or policy, as well as asking whether he ought to perform this or that action” (Pettit and Brennan, 1986, p. 441). Pettit’s model is applicable to the story, as Joseph comes to a sudden stop when he finally goes beyond his own moral limit.

Joseph’s moral corruption is influenced by several factors, but interestingly enough, Vilikovský decides to remove a lot of nuance and anchor the character’s resolve and motivation into baser instincts, as Joseph selects fight over flight: “what else was an escape if not admitting defeat?” (transl. J.O.).⁴ Joseph’s choice to mirror the actions of his captor was an attempt to regain control over his life. The government had leverage and knew about Joseph’s family, so Joseph stalked the policeman and found what he presumed to be the officer’s daughter. As the police lied to him to lure him into detention, he lied to the policeman’s child and trapped her in an attic. He taunted the policeman as he was taunted; he demanded his freedom as he now thought he had more power than his captor. After being rebuked, he tries to keep the situation stable. The young girl was a gullible child, but after being held for days, she demands to be set free. In a panic, Joseph hits her to keep her from rebelling further. This marks a sudden shift in

mood. The protagonist did not mirror anyone's action this time; he acted from his own free will and could not even reason that this behaviour was copied from someone else.

Since the beginning of his resolution to regain freedom, his actions have been fuelled by a twisted logic that he could fight with whatever he had, and this included involving children in the conflict. Joseph argued that he did not want to lose and "... every war has its victims and in the bottomless depths, in the blackness of defeat, he felt something akin to dark freedom" (trans. J.O.).⁵ Therefore, in his own mind, he was justified in taking the actions and his limits were set by what he experienced at the hands of his enemy. By hitting the young girl, he could no longer pretend that his actions were the correct course of action. The protagonist is shown as a callous person over the entire course of the story – deciding that fighting for himself is more useful than worrying about his family, breaking his marriage vows with a one-night stand, stalking the police officer to find how to gain the upper hand in the conflict, and kidnapping and assaulting a young child. The fact that he has been put under pressure does not excuse any of these actions, as he wanted to escape the oppressive regime to live freely. Sen argues that "individual conceptions of justice and propriety, which influence the specific uses that individuals make of their freedoms, depend on social associations- particularly on the interactive formation of public perceptions and on collaborative comprehension of problems and remedies" (Sen, 2000, p. 31). Even if only two people knew what he had done – himself and the young girl, his conscience finally evaluates his action as evil and therefore, he faces a punishment set by himself. After releasing the girl from the attic, he hangs himself using the girl's clothing as a makeshift rope. The following revelation that the girl was unrelated to the police officer and seemed unaffected by her entrapment and Joseph's slap fuel the dramatic irony and showcase the unreliability of Joseph as a narrator.

Placing the conflict in further context, the two main branches of ethics clash within this story; consequentialism insisting on the person deciding their own path for their own motives and deontologism fighting for dominance with its prescriptive nature. Joseph knows that kidnap, entrapment and assault are against the law, that they are actions which are not only immoral but also illegal. He also realizes that the law did not protect his family; it has on the contrary been complicit in ensuring his options are limited. Vilikovský created a world where personal and social values clash, so Joseph has to choose between:

"1) the basic value that the people must be allowed to decide freely what traditions they wish or not wish to follow; and 2) the insistence that established traditions be followed (no matter what), or, alternatively, people must obey the decisions by religious or secular authorities who enforce traditions-real or imagined" (Sen, 2000, pp. 31-32).

It is also necessary to account for the behaviour of a person not only in isolation but in a community. The environment shapes the personal values and morals of the individual, and therefore it shapes their actions to an extent. The fact that his character has been put under pressure does not absolve him of blame for his actions, and some of them – adultery, assault – are solely his own. However, there is evil rooted in the community and Joseph's loyalty is tested. Is a betrayal of friendship acceptable or condemnable if the other option is a betrayal of family? And while Joseph's struggle is important, the other side of the story is equally important. What does the story tell the reader about a society and its morals? The policeman answers this question and uncovers another piece of the society for the reader: "Politicians come and go, one is in power now, another one will be later, but whoever is in power, they need tools to accomplish their goals" (trans. J.O).⁶ The antagonist views himself as a tool or means to an end. This is problematic for several reasons, the main being that humans should never become an instrumental value – a means to an end. A society which reduces its members to a sum of their skills and ignores their individuality is functional on the surface, but as the story establishes, is also on the brink of revolution. This statement serves the policeman as an excuse, as he can ignore any responsibility for his own actions and suppress his conscience.

In the end, we can say that this story is not about good and evil, but about power. The fear of losing absolute power over a nation, the misuse of power to wilfully break societal laws and threaten people into compliance and the unwillingness to admit defeat leads to both sides losing. The domino effect of the protagonist's collapse of moral values, his decision to survive by any means available and necessary proves unsustainable and ultimately fatal.

Endnotes:

¹ Original text: "vy sám, vy ako taký pre nás vôbec nie ste zaujímavý"... "ukázať, že čo chceme, to si urobíme, v Rakúsku alebo hocikde inde." (Vilikovský, 2009, p. 10).

² Original text: "Klamať sa nepatrí, čo? Klamať je hriech. Mimochodom, my sme neklamali, oklamal vás ten rakúsky policajt, a ten sa z toho vypovedá. Desať zdravasov, a bude zase čistý ako ľalia" (Vilikovský, 2009, p. 14).

³ Original text: "Ak ste náhodou zabudli, ja som s deťmi v tejto hre nezačal. Len som sa nechal inšpirovať... A keď vám nekrváca srdce nad nimi, prečo by mne malo krváčať nad vašou dcérou?" (Vilikovský, 2009, p. 98).

⁴ Original text: "čo iné bol napokon útek, ak nie priznanie porážky?" (Vilikovský, 2009, p. 14).

⁵ Original text: "no každá vojna ma svoje obete, a v bezodnej hĺbke, v čiernote tej porážky cítil aj akúsi temnú slobodu" (Vilikovský, 2009, p. 14).

⁶ Original text: "Politici prichádzajú a odchádzajú, raz je pri moci jeden, inokedy druhý, ale nech je pri moci ktokoľvek, na uskutočnenie svojich zámerov potrebuje nástroje" (Vilikovský, 2009, p. 40).

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