

# **The Dynamics of Evil as the Disproportionate Desire to Deny Death and to be Divine: Phenomenological Insights of Paul Ricoeur and Ernest Becker**

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*Abstract:* Without attempting to give a philosophical analysis of the origin of evil, the author presents some of the dynamics at work in the emergence of evil, based mostly on Paul Ricoeur and Ernest Becker. Ricoeur points out that the disproportion that characterizes human beings makes evil possible, though not necessary. The progress from *bios* to *logos* has enabled us greatly and also made evil possible. As a continuation of the philosophical analysis, Becker showed the psychological dynamics at work, whereby evil multiplies itself in the very attempt at eliminating it. Both the thinkers trace the existence of evil (and also goodness and freedom) to the disproportion or in-betweenness in the human condition. So this article is a phenomenological description of the emergence and progress of moral evil in individual human beings and human society.

*Keywords:* Earnest Becker, denial of death, disproportion, evil, fallibility, human condition, immortality project, Paul Ricoeur, shadow, symbol

## **1. Introduction**

“The essence of man is discontent divine discontent; a sort of love without a beloved, the ache we feel in a member we no longer have” (Ortega y Gasset 1940) “Divine discontent” and “denial of death” are characteristics of contemporary humans. And they are

also intimately connected to the emergence and existence of evil. In this essay an attempt is first made to relate evil, at least moral evil, to the basic human condition of disproportionality. For this we draw insights from two prominent thinkers of the last century: philosopher Paul Ricoeur and psychologist Ernest Becker.

Our aim in this article is not to give any ontological basis for evil, but to understand phenomenologically, some dynamics underlying the prevalence and progress of evil. We shall see that evil perpetuates itself in the very process of fighting it.

After first analysing the fallibility in human nature, we try to explore the symbolism of evil, and then in the final section, see the dynamics of evil perpetuating itself in the very struggle against death, and consequently evil itself.

## 2. The Fallible Human

Paul Ricoeur has been one of the most outstanding philosophers of the last century. In Ricoeur's first major work, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950), one finds an expression of a perennial theme central to his anthropology, namely the two-dimensional character of all constituent features of human existence. Contrary to Sartre's claim that there is radical difference between consciousness or the for-itself and materiality or the in-itself, a difference that pits the for-itself's (*pour-soi*) freedom against the in-itself's (*en-soi*) sheer facticity, Ricoeur holds that the voluntary and involuntary dimensions of human existence are complementary. There is, to be sure, no seamless harmony between these two dimensions. Each person has to struggle with the conflict between them. But this conflict is what ultimately makes one's freedom and fallibility genuinely mine, what gives me my distinctive identity, and what enables evil in oneself and in society (Stanford 2008).

Ricoeur extends his account of fallibility in *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil*, both published in 1960. In these works he addresses the question of how it is possible for us to go wrong, to have a bad will. In *Fallible Man* he argues that there is a basic disproportion between the finite and the infinite dimensions of a human being. This disproportion is epitomized by the gap between

*bios*, or one's spatiotemporally located life, and *logos*, or one's reason that can grasp universals. This disproportion shows up in every aspect of human existence. It is manifest in perception, in thought and speech, in evaluation, and in action. By reason of this disproportion, we are never wholly at home with ourselves and hence we can go wrong. Hence, we are fallible.

This disproportion does not, in spite of Sartre, render our existence absurd, according to Ricoeur. Rather, the very disproportion that makes us fallible and makes human evil possible is also what makes goodness, knowledge, and achievement possible. It is that which both distinguishes us from one another and at the same time makes it possible for us to communicate with each other, through *logos* (Stanford 2008).

## **2. 1 Description of Human Fallibility**

The fact that humans can be observed from various different perspectives, all of which may be justified but not always compatible with each other, indicates a crisis in the self-understanding of the subject. The analysis of the fundamental possibility of human will in *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* has shown that there is a break, a wound, a non-agreement within humans. This non-agreement makes it impossible for them to see themselves transparently. Ricoeur is not satisfied just with this analysis. The fundamental structure of the Will, which he has traced out, is only a preliminary result in view of the fact of human failures and fallibility. Since it is an absurd fallibility, it cannot be captured though the description of its own nature. Furthermore it presents an alien object which can be philosophically approached only through concrete experiences.

Thus, for Ricoeur, fallibility provides an understanding of the possibility of evil and human freedom without implying their necessity. As such, fallibility is a concept open to elaboration from a purely reflective basis. Fallibility as the possibility for evil is taken as a primary characteristic of human existence. With this concept of fallibility human existence is the place or possibility for the manifestation of evil (FC, 14 and Ihde 1971: 113.).

In two different ways Ricœur tries to capture and describe this *fallibility*. The transition from innocence to guilt can be understood only in concrete expressions of human experiences, that is, through the act of confession, or avowal (*Bekennntnis*), which later leads one to take responsibility for one's actions. In *La symbolique du mal*, he examines therefore the symbolic language of the experiences of guilt. But before that he studies the breaking point of evil. Thus he continues his description of the fundamental human possibilities which he had begun and executed in a preliminary and abstract form in *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* by interpreting the structures of the Will as fallible. Because of the opaque and absurd characteristic of guilt, its description (which emerges mainly out of a convergence of concrete signs) could only be an "empirie" and not an "eidetic", a description of it. Fallibility describes a weakness which makes evil possible. It lies in the "structure of mediation between the poles of the finite and the infinite nature of man" (FM 9).

## 2.2 Interpretation of Fallibility

Ricœur has sought to show the situation of the human condition as being in between the finite and the infinite, as having a certain *in-betweenness* or *disproportion*, all of which is constitutive of fallibility or the possibility of the Rupture. Thus in relation to knowledge there is a disproportion of *finite perspective* and *infinite word*; in relation to willing there is a disproportion between finite *character* and infinite *well-being*; and in relation to feeling there is a disproportion between *pleasure* and *happiness*. This could be illustrated as follows (Thorer 1984: 36-37):

## DISPROPORTIONILITY IN HUMANS

	Infinite Orientation	Finite Fulfilment	Mediation
Knowing	Infinite Word (Verb)	Finite Perspective	PureImagination
Willing	Well-being	Character	Respect
Feeling	Happiness	Pleasure	Mind
	Original Affirmation	Existential Difference	Human Mediation

The human as fallible means that the propensity to and possibility of moral evil is present in its constitution. Fallibility results out of the tension-relationship between the finite and the infinite. Analogously to Kant's categories of qualities (Reality-Negation-Limitation), Ricœur also differentiates three categories in the human constitution, which are characterised through tension: *the original affirmation, the existential difference* and *human mediation*. The moment of the infinite, which we have seen in three levels, (namely the Verb, the idea of Blissfulness and the Mind seeking happiness) are the very moments through which the original affirmation is enriched, perfected and spiritualised. The original affirmation may be trampled upon by the existential negation, which presents to the man as a perspective, as character and as life feeling. "Human being is the joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite" (FM 140). This means "that man is capable of joy, joy through fear, and in overcoming the fear, that is the basic reason for all disproportion in the affective region and the source of affective vulnerability" (FM 140).

Fallibility is exposed through evil. Otherwise we can say that fallibility is the condition or the potential for evil. Thus fallibility has a double sense. It is the breaking point of evil, so to say, the weak point in the chain. In this sense fallibility is the original situation, from which evil emerges. The evil in fact points to an original situation of innocence. The *depravity* of human beings lies in a longing for a non-guaranteed perfection. The original situation of innocence is nowhere present. It can be imagined through the existing situation determined by evil and set apart from it. So one can imagine this original situation of innocence, as we normally find in myths. Thus the myths of the fall are always connected with the myths of creation and those of innocence.

Over and above these, fallibility means not just the breaking point of evil, but also the capability to sin and to commit evil. It requires only one step to move from the vulnerability to the *actuality* of evil. "To say that man is fallible is to affirm at once that the limitation of one being, that does not fall with itself, is the original weakness out of which evil emerges. Further, evil can emerge out of this weakness only because it dares" (FM 189; Thorer 37).

### 2.3 Fallibility as a Symbol

Ricœur's examination of the voluntary and the involuntary has made us aware that in man there is a break, a wound, a disproportion, an *in-betweenness*, a non-agreement within himself. In the fallibility of humans, Ricœur seeks to grasp precisely this world and to characterise it. The tensional relationship between the infinite orientation in humans and the finite fulfilment turns out to be the reason and location for fallibility. The mediation which succeeds in the object of knowledge and in the works of practice, remains in the affective region as constant conflict and tension. Pleasure is more than a sign, it is a promise and a guarantee of happiness. This happiness would be sought after through *avoir*, *pouvoir* and *valoir*. For wo/man in every finite fulfilment there exists the danger of shutting off the affective dimension and of regarding the finite fulfilment as the whole. Fulfilment, which could serve as a symbol of the desired blissfulness tends to deviate itself to an idol. The symbolised structure, through which Ricœur sees certain linguistic signs as characterised, corresponds to the human Will. It is the same for the location and for vulnerability. Humans can go against their own nature by forgetting the symbolic structure of the finite fulfilments, crossing over from symbols to idols.

The fallibility of man describes and characterises more precisely than the preceding *Eidetic of the Will* the location in which symbolic speech is proper and significant. At the same time it shows that fallibility is a situation which we can consider for its own sake and which lets itself be accessible to us through actual concrete acts of the evil (sin). Thus our reflection points to the transition from the mere possibility to the concrete actuality of evil and further to an expression of the actual evil in confession, which means, in the realm of symbols. Thus the symbol serves humans in their self-expression.

### 3 The Symbolism of Evil

Fallibility as a symbol leads us to appreciate the symbolics and to trace how evil reveals itself in terms of the primary symbols of stain, guilt and sin, as indicated by Ricoeur.

#### 3.1 The Symbol as the Starting Point for Thinking

The examination of human fallibility has shown, where and how the evil in man can originate. The transition from innocence to guilt is not to be understood otherwise than as an execution of the confession by which man accepts his responsibility for his actions in symbolic language. In *La symbolique du mal*, Ricoeur is engaged with the concrete expressions of the human experience of evil in symbols (which we also meet in myths and in primary confessions).

Before he actually proceeds with his task of studying the symbolism of evil through its concrete expressions, Ricoeur gives an account of his procedure. "How do we move from the possibility of human evil to its actuality, from fallibility to its act?" (SB 9; Thorer, 39). This is the initial question for him. He wants to capture the transition from fallibility to its actualization by concentrating on the symbolism of evil from concrete human experiences. What he intends to do is a phenomenology of guilt, which repeats itself on its way to the imagination and to the projection of the confession of guilt. The phenomenology screens and orders the materials which would be the object of human thought. Thus there is an intimate connection between philosophical speculation and the pre-reflective expression (of guilt for example) in symbols. When one reflects on the philosophical expressions of evil, one is led back to the original expressions of it in the myths. Then there is the move from the myths to its building blocks – the symbols. The symbols characterise evil as blindness, as ambiguity, as anger. They refer to an oppressive experience and man in turn tries to grasp this experience with the help of language. The experience of evil forces itself to be expressed, so that all the speaking - including the philosophical reflection - about it refers back to its original experience.

The area of investigation in *La symbolique du mal* is limited, as Ricoeur points out. It refers to a particularly important area: how evil touches on a central and crucial relationship between man and the

sacred, to which the myth gives witness. So it is to be expected that an examination in this area will give us a deeper understanding of the myths and symbols. In this crisis, the whole vulnerability of reality is evident: "Because evil is in a special way the critical experience of the sacred, the threatening rupture of this relationship of man with the sacred may be urgently felt, and [also] how man is dependent on the power of this sacred" (SB 12; Thorer 1984: 39).

### 3.2 The Symbols of Evil: Stain, Sin, Guilt

Ricœur elaborates his understanding of evil in terms of the primary symbols of stain, sin and guilt. In *La symbolique du mal*, the imagination goes back to the farthest region where crime and misfortune are not to be differentiated. The Stain, which is associated with definite actions, is something analogous to a material thing. Evil action brings with it punishment. Evil action effects suffering. So the symbolism of *Stain* is the first explanation and rationalisation of suffering. The imagination of a stain points to a judging and avenging instance, which though remaining anonymous, concretises itself in the laws and rules of society. When the guilty is accused of a crime, there is also a simultaneous expectation of responsibility, of proper punishment and with it a hope that the fear and consequences of this crime would thus disappear (Bradley 2005: 444f).

A new step in the development of evil is the building up of *sin consciousness*. This consciousness presupposes a personal relationship to the God who invites us. Sin shows that aspect of guilt felt in the presence of God. Biblically speaking, sin is the breaking of the covenant.

The next stage of internalisation is reached with the formation of *guilt consciousness*. Guilt shows the subjective moment of the crime (to be differentiated from sin, the objective, ontological moment). Guilt consciousness consists of the fact that one is intensively aware of one's responsibility and of his ownership. In this sense, it is anticipated and internalised, leading to pricks of conscience.

The *imagination* of evil develops from a material understanding (Stain) of evil to a deeper internalisation (Guilt). In this process the symbols of the earlier stages of development are not just denied or negated, but are carried over to the later stages of development. Thus there exists a connection between all these symbols. "So there is a circular



movement taking place between all the symbols: the last symbol relives the sense of the preceding symbol, but the first gives the last the full symbolic power” (SB, 176. Cf. Thorer, 41). If one wants to name the concept towards which the development of the original symbols of evil leads, then one is confronted here with the paradox of the “Non-free Will”. This concept – which is not identical with that of fallibility, but which is to be understood only in connection with the symbolism of evil, and which in turn gives it its significance – is characterised by Ricœur as having three moments (Thorer 1984: 42):

- a. *Positivity*: Evil is a power
- b. *Expressivity*: Evil presupposes the free decision of man and comes as a temptation
- c. *Infection*: If humans give in to evil, first it is an outward act and then it spreads. It becomes contagious. At the same time, turning itself over, it tends to make the agent of the action to be innerly a slave.

So far we have analysed the philosophical contribution of Paul Ricoeur on evil, which could be enhanced by the insights of social psychologist Ernest Becker, as we proceed to the next section.

#### **4. Evil as Denial of Evil (Mortality)**

Another prominent and insightful thinker of the last century who dwelt elaborately on evil is Ernest Becker in his two classics (Becker 1973 & 75). Like Ricoeur, he too felt that evil finds its driving force in the human’s paradoxical nature: “in the flesh and doomed with it, out of the flesh and in the world of symbols and trying to continue on heavenly flight” (Becker 96). Becker humbly reminds humanity that we are still animals, with all of the instincts and seemingly irrational chaotic impulses befitting all animals. Yet, paradoxically, humanity is fitted with a sense of reason that wishes to attain a “destiny impossible for an animal” (Becker 1975: 96). What we perceive as evil, in every form, is essential to any temporal creature. It is a part of the very properties of humanity that we exhibit qualities of moral evil, according to Becker.

Ernest Becker provides part of the answer to the problem of evil; that is, the paradoxical nature of the human, just as Ricoeur does.

Humanity is both animal and rational, and there lies the source of evil. A human being is a finite, limited and fallible being that is controlled mostly by animal urges based mostly around survival, while at the same time possessing a reasonable mind capable of transcending these things and reaching out to the Divine. Humans are capable of creating evil as part of their nature, choosing evil in the very search for the good. Our desire to eliminate evil may itself be our undoing (Hoffman 2002).

#### 4.1 Participating in the Immortality Project

Why is it that of all the creatures on the earth human beings are the only ones to wage war, commit genocide, and build weapons of mass destruction? Social psychologist Ernest Becker raised this question and then proposed an insightful answer in his book, *Escape from Evil* (Becker 1975), going one step further than Ricoeur.

Becker's answer begins by recognizing that of all creatures, human beings alone seem to be the ones who are conscious of their own mortality. This awareness gives rise to an anxiety that most people would rather not feel. So people cope with this situation by essentially choosing sides. They choose to align themselves with the side of life rather than of death, or identifying themselves with "immortality projects" (Hoffman 2002). People align themselves with the side of life by seeking anything that promises to sustain and promote their own lives, such as power or money. Alignment with power can have two faces: malignant power over others, as the power created by autocrats, or benevolent power, as in the power vested in the skills of a physician. Likewise, alignment with money can result in exploitation or philanthropy.

It may be noted that people also seek to align themselves with the side of life by seeking alignment with things that endure beyond a single individual's lifetime. These can include making a "lasting" contribution to a field of art, literature, scientific inventions or knowledge. These can also include involvement with religious movements or specific cultures. These larger than life phenomena in some way assure the perpetuation of the significance of the people associated with them, a kind of immortality (Hoffman 2002).

From this point of view, a threat to a person's culture, religion, or "lasting contributions" is viewed as a threat to that person's *own* immortality project. The immortality project must be defended at all costs. This is the reason why some conflicts in the world can become so intractable. It's not just my country or tribe that is being threatened, but the very significance of my own life. Becker says, "This is what makes war irrational: each person has the same hidden problem, and as antagonists obsessively work their cross purposes, the result is truly demonic" (Becker 1975: 109).

People also try to align themselves with the side of life by aligning themselves with what is "good." This is because life is associated with "good" as opposed to death, which is "bad." Becker argues that this alignment with good may also be a major cause of evil. To follow his reasoning it is necessary to make a little digression to understand the psychological concepts of shadow and projection (Becker 1973).

## **4. 2 Projecting the Shadow of the Shadow**

The psychological shadow is the dark complement of the consciously expressed personality. It represents those personal qualities and characteristics that are unacceptable to the conscious ego. To borrow a fitting image from the poet Robert Bly, the shadow is like a sack that you drag behind you everywhere you go and into which you toss all the aspects of yourself that you are ashamed of and don't want to look at (Bly 1998). The psychological shadow is much like the normal human shadow: everybody has one; when you face toward the light you can't see your own shadow; and sometimes everybody else but you can see it.

Oftentimes these disowned contents of the psychological shadow are "projected" onto someone else. Then we see "out there" what is really "in here". Typically the person we choose to project onto is not entirely innocent. He or she has some "hooks" on which we can hang our projections. If we're ashamed of our own anger, we find a slightly irritated person and view her as totally enraged. That's how projection of the shadow works.

People with inflated self esteem find it easy to see themselves as being almost always on the side of the “good.” Becker’s argument is that in the process of taking the side of life and of the good, we project our shadow onto an enemy. Then we try to kill it, and in this process perpetrate evil, without our willing it.

Psychologist Roy F Baumeister also reaches a similar conclusion. He holds that a major cause of evil in the world is the idealistic attempt to do good. Some examples include the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Thirty Years’ War in Europe, in which Catholic and Protestant troops devastated much of Germany in attempting to wipe out the “evil” version of the Christian faith represented by the other side, murders committed to prevent the “evil” of abortion, and the Stalinist and Maoist purges in Russia and China. He points out that “studies of repressive governments repeatedly find that they perceive themselves as virtuous, idealistic, well-meaning groups who are driven to desperately violent measures to defend themselves against the overwhelmingly dangerous forces of evil” (Baumeister 1997).

For instance, in many ways the Nazis were idealists. The Nazi SS was composed of the elite, the noblest of the population; yet they willingly committed the most horrible deeds. The Nazis wanted to transform their society into a perfect one. They wanted to root out the elements that they considered “evil”. Yet they almost never considered their own actions as evil, but perhaps at worst an unfortunate necessity in carrying out a noble enterprise (Baumeister 1997: 34, 38). The Nazis projected filth and evil on to the Jewish people and then tried to establish a “pure” state by eliminating the Jews. One of the professed motivations of racist lynchings in Western society was to maintain the “purity” of the white race. Many animal species, including coyotes, wolves, and prairie dogs have been irrationally persecuted by humans in the name of eliminating “varmints” and “filth” and “disease-carriers.” Enemies are “dirty.”

Historically, nations have been aroused to war by the depiction of the enemy as pure evil. In cases of reciprocal violence, such as war, each side tends to see itself as the innocent victim and the other as the evil attacker. If we, as a nation, do not do our own

“shadow” work, we will simply respond to violence with more of the same and in this process we ourselves will perpetuate evil.

Once a person has decided that some other is evil (or devil), the decision helps justify behaviours that tend to belittle or punish the other. Such behaviours are typically the behaviours that justify the other person in seeing the first person as evil. This reciprocal projection and dehumanization usually leads to a downward spiral. Patterns of violence often grow worse over time. The typical pattern for marital violence and violence among strangers is for minor insults and slights to escalate more or less slowly to physical attacks and violent aggression (Baumeister 1997: 283).

As Baumeister points out, one of the reasons why violence tends to spiral downward is that there is typically a huge discrepancy between the importance of the act to the perpetrator and to the victim. Baumeister calls this the magnitude gap (1997: 18). For example, rape is a life-changing event for a woman, while it may be only a few moments of excitement and limited satisfaction to the rapist. Whether an SS officer murdered 25 or 30 Jews in a given day was a matter of additional work for the SS officer, but a matter of life and death for the 5 additional Jews.

Hoffman notes that the magnitude gap functions in a way that makes evil worsen over time. In a pattern of revenge, as occurs in terrorism and occupation, the roles of victim and perpetrator are constantly being reversed. The perpetrator (A) may think he has harmed the victim (B) only at a level of, say, one damage point. The victim (B) however feels harmed at a level of ten points. To exact tit-for-tat revenge, B perpetrates harm on A at a level of ten, which from B’s point of view may seem only fair, but from A’s point of view may feel like harm at a level of 100. This of course seems totally out of proportion and requires further revenge as A and B switch roles again (Hoffman 2002).

Becker’s analysis offers a way understanding the instances of genocide and mass murder in human history. He suggests, chillingly, that one way to gain the illusion of psychological power over death is to exert physical control over life and death. He points out that the killings in the Nazi concentration camps increased dramatically toward the end of the war, when the Nazis began to have a sense

that they might actually lose. Mass slaughter gave the illusion of heroic triumph over death/evil.

In Becker's terms, people who maximize their own take are maximizing the "side of life" narrowly understood as their own welfare. They act to eliminate the "evil" of their own impoverishment. They ignore the fundamental fact of our human interrelatedness, a fact attested to by spiritual traditions throughout history (Hoffman 2002) and in this process aggravate the evil they wish to alleviate.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article we had the modest aim of indicating some of the dynamics in the working out of evil. Ricoeur's understanding of the disproportion that characterizes human beings was, he came to conclude, insufficient to account for occurrences of actual will. No direct, unmediated inspection of the cogito, as Descartes and Husserl had proposed, could show why these evils, contingent as each of them is, in fact came to be. Recognizing the opacity of the cogito in this respect confirmed his suspicion that all self-understanding comes about only through "signs deposited in memory and imagination by the great literary traditions." The progress from *bios* to *logos* has enabled us greatly and also made evil possible. Thus we have arrived at an antinomy and this is where philosophy has to stop.

By refusing to accept mortality as part of their very nature, humans deny their animality and attempt to be divine. In this very process of denial of death and anxiety, the humans join the "immortality projects" and disrespects the disproportion that is intrinsic to the human condition, enabling evil to emerge.

As a continuation of the philosophical analysis, Becker showed the psychological dynamics at work, whereby evil multiplies itself in the very attempt at eliminating it. Though both the thinkers trace the existence of evil to the disproportion or in-betweenness in the human condition, it has not been our aim to give any account of the origin of evil.

So Tao Te Ching's insight, formulated 2500 years ago, is valid even today.

There is no greater misfortune  
than to underestimate your enemy.  
Underestimating your enemy  
means thinking that he is evil.  
Thus you destroy your three treasures  
and become an enemy yourself (Lao-Tzu 1995).

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