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**Flusser's Moral Theory – Philosophy as Melancholy**

“Soon I shall have understanding of videocassette recorders and car telephones; and when I have understanding of them, I shall have understanding of computers ... and when I have understanding of computers, I shall be the Supreme Being”

Evil, in the movie *Time Bandits* (1981)

“Perhaps it was about time, after such a grandiose voyage, to return to a less pretentious mind [...] after so much progress, great inventions, pompous discoveries and conquests, it is perhaps the time to admit to our defeat [...]”

Vilém Flusser, *History of the Devil* (2008)<sup>1</sup>

Vilém Flusser is a moral philosopher worthy of careful study and criticism; and this paper is my attempt to critically investigate this crucial aspect of his writings. To set the background for this topic, think of how the subject of the presence of evil in the world has always been a troubling moral question. Many philosophers, starting with the Greeks, have suggested ways of dealing with the problem. Of course I won't attempt to assess here how suitable all these responses are. My task is to give a brief account of how Flusser's moral philosophy – philosophy as melancholy – bears on our understanding of the human nature in relation to evil.

To focus attention on the significance of Flusser's moral theory, I shall compare him with Hegel. This comparison isn't accidental, though, for both philosophers tried to lay the basis of the origin of evil in dialectical terms by elaborating on myths derived from the *Book of Genesis*. Hegel discusses the problem in his version of the Story of the Fall of Man<sup>2</sup> (or Fall for short), and Flusser in his own interpretation of the Story of Creation. The contribution to the debate of both philosophers is obviously important, but I hope to show that Flusser's radical narrative can achieve what Hegel set out as his aim but failed to convince.

In order to introduce the disagreement between Flusser and Hegel, let me summarize their arguments in more explicit terms. In Hegel's account, history is nothing but the content of God's

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from Vilém Flusser's *A história do diabo* have been translated by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Following on Hegel, the term *man* is used as a matter of convenience throughout to mean human beings in general, unless otherwise stated.

governance and will. As such, one may conclude that evil is a necessary and inevitable step in the improvement of human nature and understanding. In other words, we ought to understand that “what was intended by Eternal Wisdom is actually accomplished in the domain of existence, active Spirit, as well as in that of mere Nature” (Hegel 2007: 15).

For Flusser, the lessons of evil are hard-learned in the halls of history; and he claims very little respect for Hegel’s discovery. All Hegel accomplished with his dialectics of progress was to “replace the self-indulgent gods of thunder and rain for a pallid notion of nationalism.” World history, he says, is in fact nothing but the unfolding of the Devil, the very serpent<sup>3</sup> Hegel exonerated in his account of evil. In sum, the whole symphony of civilization, “all the progress of humanity against the limits imposed upon us by the divine, and our daily struggles for the Promethean fire of freedom, is nothing but the majestic work of the Devil” (Flusser 2008: 89).

Flusser’s claim deserves careful consideration, since he did not speak of evil in an equally vigorous manner very often. However, there is a related assertion in his later essay “War and the State of Things” published in *The Shape of Things* in 1999, in which he clearly disregards Hegel’s historical dialectics of progress (as a story that gets better time and again as it advances), by saying that in fact “everything that is good for something is pure Evil” (Flusser 1999: 33). This is of course the central point of contention between Flusser and Hegel, but before embarking on a detailed analysis of it, something else needs to be said about Flusser’s general claim.

What does it mean to say that the whole symphony of civilization is nothing but the unfolding of the Devil? Indeed, if everything that is good for something is pure evil, as Flusser says, how are we to know whether or not overcoming evil is even possible? Interestingly enough, despite the vigor of his writings, Flusser also seemed dissatisfied with the intellectual *cul-de-sac* into which his claims about the Devil had led him. Thus, when asked by J. C. Ismael in an interview in 1970 whether the devil had the last laugh, he admitted: “I have not resolved the problem of the

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<sup>3</sup> I won’t take much space to investigate this point here. Notice, however, that Hegel clearly adopts the Gnostic view that the serpent in the Garden of Eden was the Devil in disguise. There is no evidence in the *Book of Genesis*, though, in support of this idea. In fact, the word “devil” doesn’t even appear in the Old Testament. Truly, *Ezekiel* 28:13 speaks of the devil thus: “thou hast been in Eden the Garden of God”. What about the New Testament? Paul, for example, in *II Corinthians* 11:3 says: “But I fear lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.” But we could argue that Paul is speaking in a rather metaphorical way here. It would appear that this idea developed much later. In fact, it is only in the *Book of Revelation* (12:9 and 20:2) – which by the way was rejected by Marcion, Tertullian, Luther, and Calvin as “not Christian at all” or “simply offensive” – that we find an explicit quote identifying the serpent with the devil, “the serpent is called the devil or Satan.” Also, the Qur’anic version of *Genesis*, which didn’t exist in book form at the time of Muhammad’s death in 632 CE, is very clear on the matter: Satan (*Iblis*) was sent to earth along with Adam and Eve, after having deceived them into eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. This claim brings us back to the passage in *Ezekiel* quoted above; but it’s still a matter of interpretation, as Satan could have been in “Eden the Garden of God” in his heydays, as Lucifer, the First-born, the “Light Bearer.” Thus, one might argue that the concept “serpent-devil” is a later idea adapted from some ancient mythology; or, as Flusser has it, another adaptation of the *logos* Christianity borrowed from Orphism.

devil; I have decided instead against madness”<sup>4</sup> The difficulty arises because, apparently, Flusser’s discussion about the Devil in his *History of the Devil* ends inconclusively; and thus that perhaps there is no reason to take the issue too seriously, or to say that it has a real function to his moral philosophy.

But I think that, on careful reading, this impression is mistaken. Far from being inconclusive, Flusser’s notion of progress as a dialectic of deadly sins helps to place the talk of morality in a philosophical serious context. The peculiar feature of Flusser’s understanding of evil can reflect and foster the exercise of a particular moral virtue, namely, *modesty*. There is little doubt that for Flusser, the melancholic moral individual lives a heroic life. Is this to say that Flusser provides “the antidote” to wordily evil? There is no way of knowing it in advance. In the last analysis, this is a matter for each reader to decide. What I do know is that what is at stake in Flusser’s account is too important to let fade from discussion.

Finally, to bring out the force of Flusser’s moral theory, and the analysis based upon it, I shall leave aside any difficulties with the fact that, in Flusser’s writings, the Devil is a fundamentally ambivalent figure, and assume that its sense is the same throughout and clear enough for my purposes here.<sup>5</sup> Now, with this bit of housekeeping behind us, we can finally begin to examine what is at issue between Hegel and Flusser. I start by summarizing Hegel’s account as clearly as I can.

## Hegel and the story of the fall of man

Perhaps I can best begin by citing what Hegel says about history: “What was intended by Eternal Wisdom is actually accomplished in the domain of existence [history], active Spirit, as well as in that of mere Nature” (Hegel 2007: 15). Put it another way, human history is nothing but the content of God’s governance and will.

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<sup>4</sup> In citing this interview, I draw on the Portuguese text edited by Ricardo Mendes, available online at <http://www.fotoplus.com/flusser//vftxt/vfmag/vfmag007>.

<sup>5</sup> To explain: I am grateful to Rainer Guldin for clarification concerning the polyvalent notion of the Devil in Flusser’s writings. I cannot pursue this matter in details in this essay, and shall limit my remarks to the face (or the mask, to use Guldin’s term) of the Devil as Flusser presents it in his *History of the Devil*. I am not, of course, suggesting that in this book the Devil isn’t an ambivalent figure – this *is* Flusser’s Devil after all. I am only seeking a less ambiguous facet of the Devil, one whose message is clear: if we examine the circumstances in which evil appears in the world, it turns out that evil is the outcome of our desire to control nature; i.e., our attempt to take on the Devil’s job. That said, for a clear survey of the fundamentally ambivalent character of the Devil in Flusser’s writings, see Rainer Guldin, “Acheronta Movo: On the Diabolical Principle of Vilém Flusser’s Writings,” *Flusser Studies* 11, May 2011, <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/11/guldin-acheronta.pdf> [22.10.2011]

Thus, if we start with Hegel's version of Fall, we ought to conclude that evil is a necessary and inevitable step in the improvement of human nature and understanding. Now, it is obvious that if Hegel is going to talk about human history in this way, he must deal with a fundamental problem: how are we to explain the existence of evil in the world? But before clarifying the logic behind Hegel's argument, it is best I offer a brief synopsis of the original story.

The Book of Genesis vividly informs us: in the beginning God told Adam and Eve that they could freely eat of every fruit in the garden, but of the tree that stood in the middle of paradise, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they should not eat or they would die. The legend also tells us that along came a being in the form of a serpent, "slier than every beast in the field," which tempted Eve to disobey God. The serpent told Eve that eating the fruit would make her as God – knowing good and evil. To make a long story short, Eve and then Adam ate of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, and they became aware of their nakedness. Then, ashamed, they made coverings of fig leaves, and hid from the sight of God. Upon discovering that Adam and Eve had disobeyed him, God expelled them from paradise. He then cursed the serpent above all the animals, "you will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life." Eve he punished with pain in childbirth and with subordination to her husband; and Adam he punished with a life of hard work (*Genesis*, 3: 1-24).<sup>6</sup>

Hegel's interpretation of this legend captures a fundamental aspect of human life: "humanity must make itself what it is; that it must produce and eat bread in the sweat of its brow, [and this] belongs to what is most essential and distinctive about it [human life], and coheres necessarily with the knowledge of good and evil" (Hegel 1985: 303). In other words, when we turn to the lives of Adam and Eve we find, in principle, a life that isn't meant to be; for man isn't fully self-conscious at first and, therefore, needs to undergo a process of cognitive development. Say, "Nature is for man only the starting point which he has to transform." Ultimately, this is what the assertion "he must produce and eat bread in the sweat of his brow" means. That is, man has to overcome natural evil, making himself what he is, as a self-conscious act. In sum, the very concept of human being or spirit, says Hegel, "suffices to show us that man is evil by nature;" thus we may call the Garden of Eden a "zoological garden," since here spirit isn't distinguished from the natural, i.e., from animal life (Hegel 1892: 46-47). It is exactly for this reason that humanity ought to elevate itself to the knowledge of good and evil; it has to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the tenets of this story vary according to circumstance and religious views. But we need not dwell here on these differences, for (I trust) the summary above suffices for our understanding of Hegel's line of reasoning.

But here a problem arises. In the course of discovering reason, upon eating of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, spirit moves from one evil to another, from the state of innocence in the zoological garden to the level of knowledge of good and evil in the cleavage. This cleavage is also evil, since it means a “general judging or dividing” (Hegel 1985: 301). Now it might seem at first sight that there is a double evil here. But this *prima facie* twofold notion of evil may be overridden; for Hegel, they are really one and the same evil. This, of course, brings us to the heart of Hegel’s dialectical doctrine. Needless to say, this is clearly too large a project for me to consider in any detail here, and so next I will merely sketch the broad notions of Hegel’s dialectics; this will be enough for our purpose.

According to Hegel, the whole of history, in fact the whole of reality, is involved in a compulsory dialectical process; everything moves in a triadic manner from the more general to the more specific, from the abstract to the concrete. Hegel called these three dialectical stages *affirmation*, *negation*, and *negation of the negation*, i.e., *the affirmation of something new*. At every step in this dialectical process, spirit manifests (necessarily) an increasing degree of rationality, self-understanding, and freedom; spirit becomes more properly itself. Against this background, we may try to clarify Hegel’s account of evil. Man begins in a state of nature. Nature is the most general and abstract state in which spirit dwells. But in such a state man is only an animal. To remain in this state is, therefore, to remain in a zoological garden; here the individual lives in “the natural wickedness of man – being a creature of nature, behaving and following the cravings of his appetite.” Thus Hegel insists on this feature: “Nature is for man only the starting point which he has to transform.” However, the moment man leaves the path of nature – the moment man eats of the tree that stands in the middle of the garden – “marks the difference between him, as a self-conscious agent [though yet to be], and the natural world.” Put another way, knowledge of good and evil *negates* the state of nature. But knowledge, the lapse from the natural paradise of unity – “though it forms a necessary element in the very notion of spirit” – is also evil, since it is a contradiction; knowledge contains the two sides: good and evil (Hegel 1892: 46-47).

This is, to be sure, when the individual begins his long voyage for self-discovery – the journey in search for the *affirmation of something new*, something to feel that terrible void left by the lapse from the paradise of unity – the cleavage. So, says Hegel, “in the same way this cleavage is a source of evil; it is also the midpoint of the conversion that consciousness contains within itself whereby this cleavage is also *sublated*” (Hegel 1985: 302).

From what has been said, then, it follows that to think evil dialectically is not only to see distinctions, but also to understand that these distinctions must be overcome. But how, one

might wonder, does the Fall illustrate this elevation? Recall, in the original story God expelled Adam and Eve from paradise, and cursed them accordingly. From then on, human life is distinguished from animal life. For Hegel the message is clear: animals don't have to work hard for their existence, or they do so but "only when compelled, and not by nature" – think here of donkeys. This is to say that animals *don't* "eat their bread in the sweat of their brow or produce their own bread, but rather find the satisfaction of all their needs directly in nature." Surely humans also find "the material for their satisfaction in nature, but this material is, so to speak, the least important element for them; the infinite provision for the satisfaction of their needs occurs only through labor" (Hegel 1985: 303). This is to say that, according to Hegel, there are two levels to the curse of eating by the sweat of one's face: *material labor* and *the labor of the spirit*.

The upshot of all this is that: overcoming the evil of cleavage or knowledge involves exercising our freedom; *that* is the labor of the spirit properly itself. That is when spirit moves necessarily to a higher degree of rationality and self-understanding. Because animals have no consciousness, they cannot make distinctions within themselves; they aren't free to exercise their will. Freewill properly itself grows out of the nature of the individual that makes conscious decisions. In short, then, genuine freedom lies not only in being able to make distinctions, in knowing good and evil, but also in the power to choose one's course of action. That is how spirit elevates itself from contradictions; and this is Hegel's conclusion.<sup>7</sup>

There is, however, a serious problem with Hegel's theory. In speaking of one's obligation to exercise his or her freedom in order to overcome evil, Hegel is using the term "evil" in its more subjective sense, in which evil appears as a result of self-negation. If so, Hegel's theory might perhaps explain the type of evil that arrives from inner struggles; but it clearly fails to explicate other forms of evil: forms of evil that don't arise from inner conflicts, i.e., evil in the broader context of human history. This critique certainly challenges Hegel's historical theodicy – and this is an impasse from which Flusser will have to elaborate an escape. But we shall leave this issue to be considered in the next section.

To end this part of our discussion, let me refer to one more feature of the Story of the Fall, the serpent who we have, for the sake of argumentation, accepted as the representation of the devil. In light of Hegel's reading, that creature – slier than every beast in the field – can be finally absolved. For Hegel, the original story mistakenly depicts the serpent as a deceiver; the Prince of Darkness himself: "The story reports that an alien creature, the serpent, seduced humanity by the

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<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, Hegel's account is far more sophisticated and comprehensive than might be thought from the necessarily short summary given here; but I hope it suffices to give us a proper understanding of Hegel's interpretation of evil, and the analysis that follows.

pretense that, if one knows how to distinguish good and evil, one will become like God. In this way the story represents [wrongly] the fact that humanity's deed springs from the evil principle [Satan]. However, the confirmation of the fact that the knowledge of good and evil belongs to the divinity of humanity is placed on the lips of God himself: "Behold, Adam has become like one of us (Gen. 3:22)" (Hegel 1985: 302).

Implicit in this passage is a comment Hegel makes somewhere else: that "The serpent represents likeness to God as consisting in the knowledge of good and evil: and it is just this knowledge in which man participates when he breaks with the unity of his instinctive being and eats of the forbidden fruit" (Hegel 1892: 46-47). Hegel's aim in this argument is clear: to refocus our reflection on the idea that the "fall" was a necessary step towards self-realization. Hence, we should acquit the serpent for, by saying that when one knows how to distinguish good and evil, one becomes like God, the Devil *wasn't* lying after all.

## Flusser and the story of creation

This section attempts to present Flusser as a moral philosopher worthy of careful study and criticism. The question then is, how does Flusser's philosophical interpretation of the biblical Story of Creation bear on our understanding of human nature and morality in relation to evil? For him the message the myth intends to convey is clear: If we carefully consider the circumstance in which evil appears in the world, it turns out that evil is the outcome of our absurd desire to transform this world into a permanent one; i.e., our attempt to take on the Devil's job.<sup>8</sup> Understanding this conflict is the key to understanding Flusser's moral philosophy.

Flusser was obviously dazzled by the very first words of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." He thinks that we should look at this passage thus: "in the beginning God created space and time" or "God created the phenomenal world and the Devil" – and this very process of creation imposed upon the Devil, and consequently upon humanity,

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<sup>8</sup> To consider: this way of describing evil seems to be related to Camus' idea of man as a poor creature desperately seeking hope and meaning in a hopeless, meaningless world; recall that, in his own words, Flusser tells us that Camus is the thinker with whom he most agreed (Flusser 2008: 13-14). Sartre also elaborates on this thesis in his *The Stranger*, where he writes: "The absurd, to be sure, resides neither in man nor in the world, if you consider each separately. But since man's dominant characteristic is 'being in the world,' the absurd is, in the end, an inseparable part of the human condition" (cf. "Albert Camus (1913-1960)," by David Simpson, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://iep.utm.edu/>, (August 2010). Notice, however, that Flusser provides an important gloss on the whole idea: that the absurdity of evil is man's desire to transform this world into a permanent reality; it evolves from man's desire to break free from the constraints of nature.

three ultimate constraints, *beginning*, *heavens*, and *earth*. On this picture, we do bear a likeness with the Devil. This resemblance, says Flusser, might as well explain why “it’s [always] much easier and simpler to follow him [the Devil] than the unintelligible ways of the divine” (Flusser 2008: 31).

By the same token, we could propose another similarity: that according to the traditional account, both Satan and man freely initiated evil in heavens and earth respectively; this is to say that our evil enterprise has its origin in the very fact that, much like the devil, we are never satisfied with the divine constraints. But this relation is probably ephemeral and, thus, should stop here. For, as Flusser has it, whereas the “Devil is (perhaps) eternal, has a clear sense of his duties and, thus, accomplishes it with splendor, humanity runs in an endless circle, always arriving at the crossroad of good and evil” (Flusser 2008: 22), in the cleavage. This is, says Flusser, the clue to our struggle with good and evil. To see this better, let us reflect on Flusser’s complete foray: “How was he [the Devil] born? It’s written: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. In this sentence, every word is a mystery [...]. True, our pundits managed to shove “beginning” further into the bottomless abyss of time. Our scientists managed to dilate, distort, and curve the heavens; and they have given it dimensions totally unimaginable. They have also rounded “earth”, making her small and easy to manipulate; and they are about to leave her precariously. Even so, beginning is still beginning; heavens are still heavens; and Mother Earth continuous to shelter and feed us as she did in her first day [...]. The Devil was never satisfied with these three handcuffs [beginning, heavens, and earth]. Our imagination refuses to picture a hypothetical situation in which these three constraints would be destroyed by human effort inspired by the devil. An infinite and eternal world is beyond our understanding. The devil is, nevertheless, capable of partially evading his limits in the course of human history. However, “spirit” continues to pursue these limits retrospectively, like the expansion of a gas, but remains handcuffed nevertheless. This allows us an important consideration: An infinite and eternal world is unthinkable; but a finite and transient reality is equally inconceivable. The infinite world raises an insurmountable problem, “limitation”. The finite world provokes an equally impossible question: what lies beyond the infinite.” (Flusser 2008: 31-33).

The message is simple. The divine “represents all our attempts to surpass or deny time.” It acts within the world in order to “dissolve” it or to make it “pure being.” This is to say that God influences humanity towards that which is infinite and everlasting. By contrast, the Devil symbolizes “every human attempt to preserve time the way it is;” to break the limits imposed by God; it is the Devil who interacts with man in order to make this sympathize with his flamboyant



work, “recognizing in him a nature similar to his – and perhaps as miserable.” What is more, in performing his task, it would appear that the Devil is no idiot, since “his methods are abundant” and often more attractive than his counterpart’s (Flusser 2008: 23).

Perhaps nothing reveals the extent of Flusser’s point here with more wit and style than the metaphysical joke in the mouth of the Devil in Terry Gilliam’s film *Time Bandits* (1981): “What sort of Supreme Being created such riffraff? Is this not the workings of a complete incompetent? If I were creating the world I wouldn’t mess about with butterflies and daffodils; I would have started with lasers, eight o’clock, Day One! ... God isn’t interested in technology. He cares nothing for the microchip or the silicon revolution ... Look how he spends his time, forty-three species of parrots! Nipples for men! ... Slugs! He created slugs! They can’t hear. They can’t speak. They can’t operate machinery ... are we not in the hands of a lunatic?”<sup>9</sup>

So much for illustrating Flusser’s claim that, in performing his task, the Devil is no idiot. At at this point the reader might want to ask a more fundamental question: *who* or *what* exactly is the Devil? Is Flusser speaking metaphorically? Is the devil an actual name for an absolute principle of evil, just like his creator “God” is (possibly) a name for the absolute principle of goodness? Or are *we* the devil in disguise? Even better, is it coherent to talk about time or history as a “manifestation” of the devil? We can start answering these questions by considering what Flusser says about the *logos* or reason; and elaborating on Flusser’s understanding of the *logos* begins with his articulation of the contrast between Eastern and Western metaphysics.

For Flusser, the primary theme of Western metaphysics has always been its excessive concern with reason – the ultimate principle that allows man to push *beginning* further into the abyss of time; dilate, distort, and curve the *heavens*; and round and manipulate the *earth* at his will – and it is under this perspective that the battle between God and the Devil has been described thus far. What is distinctive about this perspective is that God represents that which is infinite, everlasting and beyond this world; and the Devil is that ugly and dark angel whose primary duty is to disrupt God’s divine project. It is clear that we westerners have always known this distinction; our understanding of good and evil, as well as our struggle and methods to overcome it, are deeply rooted in this metaphysical dichotomy. However the story changes once we change perspectives.

Try to take, then, a Buddhist standpoint for a change. At once, all the battle of our minds to grasp that ever more elusive reality, to surpass time, is nothing but the work of the Devil. From this perspective, the very concept *mind* is already the negation of the divine because, as Flusser

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<sup>9</sup> *Time Bandits*, writ. Michal Palin and Terry Gilliam, dir. Terry Gilliam, perf. Sean Connery Shelley Duval, and John Cleese, Avco Embassy Pictures, 1981.

has it, the human mind has a strange feature: “the more it drinks, the thirstier it gets.” In light of this, it isn’t surprise to hear that a Buddhist monk will devote his or her life to dissolve reality, merging his or her mind into *shunyata* or eternal emptiness. For a Buddhist, to negate reality is what is divine. To contemplate permanent death, i.e., to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth, is what represents divine liberation. In sum, that which westerners call “faith” is, for a Buddhist, in fact the ways of the devil, since it is the method of affirming the immortality of the mind (if that be not a contraction in terms); that which Westerners call heavens, Buddhists call suffering; what Westerners call hell, Buddhists call *nirvana*; what Westerners call happiness, Buddhists call death of the mind (Flusser 2008: 208).<sup>10</sup>

How are we to explain this inversion of values? For Flusser, this fundamental antithesis is entrenched in our soul. Eastern and Western perspectives are both “deeply rooted into the logos;” in the very way language is structured; i.e., in the way we are eternally enslaved by this rational ontological makeup. More simply, this inversion of values is *within* us; it is what makes us human beings. As such, the two contenders in this marvelous cosmic combat, God and the Devil, are merely fictions of our imagination, the products of the language embedded in our souls. The precious object of their dispute, our minds, is just means for their desperate appetite; in such a way that the more they drink and eat, the less satisfied they become. Thus, for Flusser the message is simple: “The devil was created to create the world; and now, when the world is finally dissolved, both the Devil and the creator of the Devil vanish” (Flusser 2008: 208)

By the use of these images, Flusser aims to show that the absurdity of reality evolves from the very nature of the logos, which has a controversial feature: it can either articulate sentences grammatically incorrect, such as the ones describing God and the Devil, and produce only indistinct speculative noises; or it can articulate sentences perfectly structured – the Vienna Circle style – and produce redundant, self-explanatory babbles. Put it this way, by eliminating semantic errors we can surely eliminate all the metaphysical clangs, rattles and bangs that create the absurdity of reality, the Kantian antinomies of reason: heavens and hell, being and nothingness, affirmation and negation, and good and evil, God and Devil. But what is the value of sentences perfectly structured? They produce nothing, says Flusser. And this is the clue to our disaster: we are eventually left alone to decide between metaphysical noise and cogent nothingness (Flusser 2008: 187).

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<sup>10</sup> This characterization of Buddhism invites certain questions that I won’t further consider here. It should be noted, however, that the core of the peculiarities that Flusser uses to illustrate the inversion of values that distinguishes Eastern and Western metaphysics is borrowed from Zen Buddhism. But it’s not unreasonable to wonder whether the same distinction actually applies to other form of Buddhism.

This is of course an unmistakable influence of Wittgenstein, the philosopher that disconcerted Flusser the most; but Flusser admits that much: language, he continues, referring to the Austrian philosopher, is like a ladder to reach the ultimate goal of silence – and “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein, 1981: 189). Much like Wittgenstein, Flusser takes this to mean that the “ladder has to be thrown away once silence is achieved.” Still, Flusser adds an important twist to the whole logical positivist idea: once we discard the ladder, thinking is also annihilated; we reach a state of semantic pseudo-nirvana. It is clear that this analytical false meditation is also the death of the old “mythical *logos* Christianity borrowed from Orphism; the same *logos* that has produced so many metaphysical speculations” and hope (Flusser 2008: 195). But a crucial question then arises: Is *this* the end of the self? Put it another way, does logical positivism solve the problem of the absurdity of reality? Of course not! The logical death of the *logos* doesn’t entail the death of the soul; and that is precisely where the conflict is rooted. Hence, according to Flusser, Wittgenstein’s analysis of language missed one fundamental aspect of the *logos*, as he writes in the following passage: “But it is obvious that logical analysis of language does not capture the totality of the *logos*. It misses the *musical* aspect of it. That is why pure logic is not Buddhism yet. It lacks the last radicalism. Surely pure logic manages to eradicate thought in a definite and inoperable way. In this sense, it is Buddhist. But it cannot annihilate life. Pure logic annihilates the “I” in its logical and epistemological sense. But it cannot destroy its psychological, existential aspect of it.” (Flusser 2008: 208) [emphasis added]

The quote is brief but not obscure. It clearly alludes to a positive aspect in Flusser’s account. But before analyzing what this positive aspect is, it is better we summarize the discussion thus far. Throughout this section we have been seeking, at least implicitly, to find answers to the question: Who is the devil? It should be quite obvious that, to Flusser, the *logos* created the Devil and consequently his counterpart, God; and if there is any other reality towards which our souls strive, that is also a metaphysical fantasy. Flusser tries to emphasize this argument by pointing at how Eastern and Western traditions think reality differently. Ultimately the tension between these two forces, God and the Devil, takes place in our minds. By eliminating the “noises” of language, by producing only propositions logically coherent we are surely able to eradicate the contradictions of reason, to eliminate the absurdity of the logical and the epistemological self. The only survivor in this battle, though bleeding badly, if I am allowed the metaphor, is the psychological ego. In sum, it is quite clear from the passage above that logical positivism *cannot* capture the totality of the *logos*; hence the extension of its meditations on the constraints of language is incapable of touching the soul. Thus Flusser saw clearly that something must have

endured the deadly metaphysical war: what survives the lethal poison of the semantic pseudo-nirvana of logical positivism is the *will*; for, ironically, “the murderer of God, of the Devil, and of the logical and the epistemological “I” was unable to kill its own will” (Flusser 2008: 208-9). Now, the real question is whether there is any degree of consolation for the “I” that survives. So this seems to be a natural place to introduce the more positive aspect of Flusser’s moral theory.

To do this, consider the word I have emphasized in the quote above: the *musical* aspect of the logos – the part of the soul logical positivism fails to eliminate. What exactly is it? Of course, far from giving a simple and straightforward response, Flusser takes us back to the self (that “guiltless murderer” of all metaphysical reality), merges it into Leibniz’s epistemological mathematics, and the “purely formal” music of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel, to finally claim that the logos can strike a balance in the combination of *life* and *thought*, music and mathematics. To be sure, I won’t try to elucidate in any detail Flusser’s articulation of life and thought or music and mathematics. What is crucial about the unifying factor that Flusser brings about between music and mathematics is his very concept of philosophy *qua* philosophy, philosophy as melancholy, i.e., the turning point for spirit to become properly itself, to transcend good and evil (Flusser 2008: 196). Now, granted that Hegel had already claimed that spirit is finally and most perfectly realized in philosophy properly itself – on the level of notion or reason – the question is then how to understand philosophy in the Flusserian sense of the word.

What is distinctive about Flusser’s definition of philosophy is that he refers to the love of wisdom as a deadly sin. In fact, Flusser equates philosophy in general to the most hideous forms of sin in the theological tradition: *pride* and *melancholy*. More simply, philosophy is the deepest level of hell. That said, philosophy is, nevertheless, also the turning point for spirit to become properly itself. So, to better understand this argument, something must be said about Flusser’s doctrine of the deadly sins.

Our point of departure has to be a remark he makes in page 202. The greatness of the love of wisdom is that “to the neophyte, philosophy is an intellectual discipline in search for concrete answers; whereas for the initiated ones, it’s the relaxing scent of a reality conquered” (Flusser 2008). In other words, to the beginner in search for ultimate truths, philosophy is existential salvation of some sort; here philosophy replaces the older ways of the divine, faith. While to the advanced disciple, philosophy becomes properly itself, the existential proof of the death of the mind. The property of philosophy at this stage is the property of pure love of wisdom. Still, what does all that mean?

Let us rephrase the analogy in line with Flusser's notion of the deadly sins: for the neophyte, the amateur philosopher in search of absolute knowledge and foundations, philosophy is *superbia* and *vanagloria* or pride and vanity; for the initiated ones, philosophy is *acedia* and *tristitia* or sloth and melancholy. In Hegelian terms, this would simply read thus: the first form of philosophy, amateurish philosophy, is not philosophy properly itself; it is philosophy in its immediate, lowest level. When philosophy becomes the existential proof of the death of the mind, the death of the logical and the epistemological ego, philosophy becomes properly itself. Space clearly precludes further examination of this important aspect of Flusser's doctrine here. But I believe this summary suffices to show us the logic behind his central thesis, and the heart of his contention against Hegel: progress *cannot* be the execution of a divine plan; it is rather the unfolding of the majestic work of the devil we have created (Flusser 2008: 202-3). To be sure, Flusser doesn't deny the idea of progress; what he clearly denies is Hegel's belief that every stage in history manifests a higher degree of perfection, self-realization and freedom. On the contrary, says Flusser, every state in history only manifests a form of sin.

To better understand Flusser's argument here, try to imagine *Ouroboros*, that ancient symbol depicting a serpent biting its own tail. The idea of a circle closing infinitely on itself can clearly be used to illustrate the dialectics of both Flusser and Hegel. However, in Hegel's dialectics of progress spirit is always moving to a higher degree of perfection every time it bites on its own tail, every time it arrives at the affirmation of something new; whereas in Flusser's dialectics of deadly sins, each bite spirit takes on its own tail only denotes an eternal return to a greater form of sin; each bite is just another step further away from the paradise of unity. This is so because the "I" incapable of killing its own will is always impelled by a higher level of lust, desire and frustration; the same lust, desire and frustration that prompted it out of that zoological garden in the first place. Of course it might be argue at this point: How exactly might a "deadly sin" be also the turning point for spirit?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This is a crucial point: namely, "What is the relationship between Hegel's philosophy of history and Flusser's conception of media evolution, leading from image to text to technical image, i.e., from the concreteness to abstraction and to a concreteness of a second degree?" Once again, I am greatly indebted to Rainer Guldin for clarification of this point. Guldin argues that "there are many points in common between Hegel's and Flusser's dialectics – the three stages, the idea of evolution, and the idea of a better world at the very end" (email to the author, 27 October 2011). In reply: I think Guldin may be right about this, but I don't need to consider this point in general here, as I am solely concerned with the normative aspect of Flusser's moral theory. As such, the conception of Flusser's dialectics of deadly sins, as I understand it here, is a normative conception. This is to say that in the present case the conception is a moral conception, one that begins with Flusser's assertion in the *History of the Devil*: that "After so much progress, great inventions, pompous discoveries and conquests, it is perhaps the time to admit to our defeat" (Flusser 2008: 22-3), and it ends with all the daring Epicurean claims (if that be not a linguistic redundancy) Flusser makes against progress in his essay "War and the State of Things." For one, "Since technicians had to apologize to the Nazis for their gas chambers not being good enough – i.e., not killing their 'clients' quickly enough – we have once more been made aware what is meant by the Devil" (Flusser 1999: 34). As a normative

Flusser clearly thinks that our way out of this dialectics of sins is, ironically, to surrender to the most serious of the seven deadly sins, *melancholy*. Remember that, according to Flusser, philosophy acquires a new priority when the mind moves from pride and vanity to sloth and melancholy. Explicitly, the faith in the words of great authorities, typical among amateurish philosophers, the “new faith” that replaces the old way of the divine, is finally reduced to a radical state of doubt where spirit makes philosophy for the sake of philosophy only.

In Flusser’s own words, the mind philosophizes “not in search for answers, illumination, or happiness, but with detachment [...] thus, far from approaching philosophy as a mendicant, the mind desires nothing, it just wishes to die.”<sup>12</sup> In this state of redemption, of acceptance of despair, philosophy surrenders herself to doubt “without asking questions or favors.” This is what Flusser means by *melancholy* – a sweeping existential submission to doubt. Put differently, the melancholic philosopher surrenders himself or herself peacefully to skepticism, because he or she finally understands that the attempt to destroy the devil, that disruptive abyss of doubt, implies in the destruction of God as well. In this mood, the melancholic philosopher refuses to exchange a life of love of wisdom for a life of fundamental truths and lies. It is in this light that philosophy finally becomes the turning point for spirit to elevate itself (Flusser 2008: 204). Doubt is, therefore, the musical aspect of the logos.

So much, then, for a brighter light at the end of the tunnel: clearly the light does exist, but it is purchased at a high price: the death of the mind, of all our certainties. As it is, one may argue that Flusser seems to leave the problem of the devil unresolved; after all his positive recommendation isn’t as clear or appealing as his radicalism. Moreover, if everything is the unfolding of the devil, and all we are left with is doubt, how are we to realistically provide the more human element with the meaning, values, truth, and goals it pursues? This problem might explain why, when asked later in an interview whether the devil had the last laugh, Flusser admitted: “I have not resolved the problem of the devil; I have decided instead against madness. If I had persisted on the same argument I would have lost the critical control of my thoughts. Therefore, I opted for sanity and against the radical speculation [...]” (Mendes, 1970). But unless we are careful to read *History of the Devil*, Flusser’s scepticism seems to tell us only what we expect

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conception, then, I think Flusser’s dialectics of deadly sins is to be distinguished from his dialectics of the conception of media evolution. Clearly, I don’t at all deny the importance of Guldin’s criticism. In fact, I think Guldin’s observations are crucial for any further discussion of Flusser’s moral theory; that they are a clear challenge to the point I set out as my task in this paper: to show that Flusser is a moral philosopher worthy of careful study and criticism. That said, one aim of the final section of this paper is to sketch – in a short space, I can do no more than that – the differences and similarities between Hegel’s historical dialectics and Flusser’s dialectics of deadly sins. However, at some future time I hope to be able to offer something more comprehensive in relation to philosophy as melancholy than these brief remarks.

<sup>12</sup> Just to be sure, this isn’t a physical, but a metaphysical death.

to hear: namely, that *there is simply no ultimate truth*. Of course Flusser is explicitly saying that; he was a cynic philosopher after all. However, this is surely not the whole story. In the remaining of this section, then, I hope to show that Flusser's scepticism didn't prevent him from taking ethics seriously.

If we take one particular aspect of his arguments wisely, we might come close to an answer to the problem of the devil. This "particular aspect" is the distinctive principle that nourishes melancholy in the Flusserian sense of the term. Flusser presses this point in Chapter 9, *Post Scriptum*. There he says: "At the beginning of this book we had the guts to defy the devil. At the end of this book this courage has faded away [...] We had the intention to kill the Devil [evil], at the end we almost killed ourselves [...] We have become more modest, and this is the only positive result of this great journey surrounded by so many promises [...] But we should not deride this result. Perhaps this may show us the critical situation in which Western society finds itself. Perhaps this result is our fate. Perhaps it was about time, after such a grandiose voyage, to return to a less pretentious mind. Perhaps the time has come, in this stage of human evolution, to feel just a bit embarrassed [...]." (Flusser 2008: 213)

After so much progress, great inventions, pompous discoveries and conquests, it is perhaps the time to admit to our defeat. But this book does not wish to be pessimist. Throughout our journey we tried to remain hopeful. But what hope? Silly question! Just another conviction of the logos: it is impossible to be quiet. This may be either a curse or a blessing, but the impossibility of silencing is a mark of continuity. The only message then is this: continue.

So, although there seems to be a sort of vagueness in the way Flusser ends his whole discussion, the same sort of abstraction that later led him to say he hadn't resolved the problem of the devil (and the reader to wonder whether the devil had the last laugh), I would say that, if we truly take Flusser's advice *not* to deride the upshot of the passage above, *modesty*, we may be able to argue that the problem of the devil *isn't* unresolved after all.

But to see this better, we need to refer to Flusser's essay "War and the State of Things" published in his book *The Shape of Things* from 1999. In this essay, Flusser reformulates Goethe's request for man to be noble, generous and good thus: "Let Man be noble, generous and good, but – having said that – does he need to be all that good?" (Flusser 1999: 30) In other words, let man be noble, generous and less good. Clearly Flusser has two ideas of the "good" in mind: namely, moral good and functional good. The latter is pure evil, simply; "the daily struggle for the Promethean fire of freedom" (Flusser 2008: 22). But how exactly is "functional good" pure evil? Flusser explains this as follows: "Since technicians had to apologize to the Nazis for their gas

chambers not being good enough – i.e., not killing their ‘clients’ quickly enough – we have once more been made aware what is meant by the Devil. We realize once more exactly what is lying in wait behind the notion of good design. Unfortunately, this does not stop us wanting to have elegant and convenient objects. We insist, despite what we know about the Devil, that the designer should be noble, generous and good (Flusser 1999: 34).

So, without mincing words, let us recall the accusation that Hegel’s historical perspective of human history and progress is seriously flawed.<sup>13</sup> We might say that, in speaking of one’s obligation to exercise his or her freedom in order to overcome evil, Hegel is using the term “evil” in its more subjective sense, in which evil appears as a result of self-negation. This understanding of evil clearly explains the type of evil that arrives from our inner struggles; in this light we might be able to account for our own imperfections and demons. But it is quite clear that we *cannot* account for the whole gamut of evil solely in terms of inner struggles, bad intentions and individual misconduct. This is to say that, if we accept Hegel’s understanding of evil, we are left with a harder case to settle, as reason demands that we explain other types of evil: evil that doesn’t arise from inner conflicts; evil in the broader context of human history.

Put it another way: why should anyone feel repulsion for the levels of hostility, poverty, inequality, exclusion and human exploitation that remain sharp around the world if, according to Hegel, “what was intended by Eternal Wisdom is actually accomplished in the domain of existence, as well as in that of mere Nature” (Hegel 2007: 15)? In sum, then, Flusser’s case against Hegel is simply this: Hegel’s doctrine cannot justify engineers and scientists apologizing to warlords for their weapons of massive destruction not being good enough. Hence, Flusser concludes, we might just suppose that Hegel’s contribution to the problem of evil amounts to merely replacing the “self-indulgent gods of thunder and rain for a pallid notion of nationalism” (Flusser 2008: 89). Of course this is a rather poetic note; but (I trust) Flusser pokes his finger on a crucial point: to praise progress as Hegel does is to elevate “what is known as the military-industrial complex of being the origin of everything elegant, amiable and good” (Flusser 1999: 32).

The reader will have gathered from the discussion so far this much: that Flusser’s moral philosophy is fundamentally primitivistic, perhaps Epicurean. Now, by way of clarification, I will make some final comments on this peculiar aspect of his ethics.

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<sup>13</sup> I claim very little originality for this critique; I attribute it to Frederick Beiser, who points out that Hegel’s interpretation of evil as self-negation is rather subjective at its best; thus, if we follow Hegel’s line of reasoning, we might perhaps be able to justify one form of evil only: evil that evolves from inner struggle. For a more detailed discussion of the problem, see “The Problem of Evil” in Beiser’s book *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 270-281.



## Comments

Let me begin with the Epicurean principle that supports Flusser's moral theory. To use the language of the myths we have discussed throughout, we may echo Flusser and claim that life in the Garden – and Epicurean garden this time – portrays a higher expression of morality, self-realization, and freedom than life in the linear development of history Hegel deified. But is this not the most awkward argument? Perhaps! But here Flusser seems to follow Epicurus in thinking that no one can get the better of the world time and again and still expect to love philosophy purely: there is a disruptive abyss of difference between the two. That said, Flusser's harder Epicurean blow is still to come: "Let us refuse to be made prisoners of the tiring and boring conversation now under way in the Western civilization, that tedious conversation called progress" (Flusser 1999: 34). In short, this is to say that coming to our best moral decision involves desiring a simpler lifestyle. In sum, the melancholic philosopher, the philosopher *qua* philosopher, has to eventually decide between "war and an elegant user-friendly life in the midst of good objects, or everlasting peace and a squalid, inconvenient life in the midst of badly functioning objects" (Flusser 1999: 33).

Even so, if we accept Flusser's solution to the problem of evil, the question can still be posed: Isn't his self-realized moral agent the most old-fashioned, unsophisticated and rustic creature of all? But this is indeed what Flusser is telling us: "I said that methodical reflection, i.e., philosophy, should lead us towards our origins" (Flusser 2005). In this light, Flusser's moral theory seems to relieve us of the problems in Hegel's historical theodicy. However, to accept philosophy as melancholy, we have to accept the fact that every moral virtue carries its own shadow; and the shadow of Flusser's moral theory is the Epicurean or primitivistic principles that support it.

Now, on a more theoretical note, the reader could still argue that it isn't altogether clear how Flusser's secularized version of the story of Creation differs from that of Hegel. There are clearly both differences and similarities.<sup>14</sup> For one thing, we must agree in this, that both philosophers acquitted the serpent for the same obvious reason: the devil in disguise *wasn't* lying to Eve after all when he said that when one knows how to distinguish good and evil, one become like God; for another, Hegel and Flusser clearly coincide in this, that the Devil represents likeness to God, as consisting in the knowledge of good and evil.

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<sup>14</sup> See footnote 9.

That said, it should be clear by now, though, that unlike in Hegel's account, the serpent in Flusser's version of the myth didn't neglect to tell Adam and Eve that: after their "grandiose voyage, after so much progress, great inventions, pompous discoveries and conquests," they would eventually have to return to the zoological garden dressed in fig leaves – "to a less pretentious mind" (Flusser 2008: 213).

Moreover, in Flusser's account, unlike in Hegel's, God was actually right in telling Adam and Eve that they shouldn't eat of the tree that stood in the middle of paradise, or they would die. God *did* fail, however, because he didn't tell them that before dying, first they would have to kill both God and the Devil, the logical and the epistemological self as well as their will – their ultimate desire to control reality. But what exactly would be the point of philosophy as melancholy if Adam and Eve had started their dialectical trip knowing what ought to be discovered?

In conclusion, I want to touch on one loose end of both myths discussed above, having to do with the fact that there is a clear if limited sense in which the grace of doubt is given to us at God's initiative. Doubt can indeed rightly be styled a *divine bequest*, for my very ability to define and contextualize my place in the world, my power to perfect myself is, in many ways, the fulfillment of this divine gift; and philosophy as melancholy opens the way to the acceptance of this grace. As such, doubt becomes the disruptive abyss that destroys the sedimentation of my beliefs, of my values – the marasmus of my settledness. Put this way, doubt is a blessing because it has the power to divest reason of its forged role as the master of nature and possessor of truth. So, in light of this, it would appear that the distinctive feature of the devil in Flusser's moral philosophy is that of the disorderly angel who bares the grace of Doubt – a task he certainly accomplishes with splendor.

Now, it is not possible to discuss in details my addition to the usual concept of doubt in Flusser's moral philosophy. But if it seems peculiar, it may be worth reflecting on the Sanskrit word for doubt, *sandehab*. In parts, *san* means "that which makes something perfect or complete" and *deha* means "body" or "existence." Thus we would not be far wrong to interpret doubt as a divine gift because it is that which allows me to affirm myself more perfectly or completely time and again. Understanding this aspect of "doubt" is indispensable for appreciating Flusser's concept of philosophy as melancholy.

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