

1.

#### THE PROBLEM IN "MACBETH"

We have already seen that the focus is on Macbeth and his wife, furthermore, we have seen that the crucial problem is the decision and the act, especially in which sense you can consciously and freely choose to do evil, then do it and then be faced with the consequences. The problem is old. Socrates maintained that no one with full insight in what was evil, would of his own free will do it and that claim had been dominating for almost two millennia. The logical power of this claim was that it was a tautology or even better; a definition.

Any human activity, to think, to speak, to act, has to focus on a purpose. The definitive impulse to throw yourself into an activity is the urge towards selfpreservation that lies deep in any living creature. That is why man cannot want his selfdestruction; he only wants the Good, understood as that which promotes its own selfpreservation.

If, however, we exclusively define the Good as man's selfpreservation, man's different attempts to achieve this would lead to mutual destruction. If I - and everyone included - unhampered and in absolute selfishness only seek my own, the misfortune I could inflict on someone would naturally be limitless. So there has to be a further addition to the concept of Good.

The Good, we might add, is not only the instantaneous need for satisfaction - in a matter of time it will often turn out to be an evil - but it is in fact the absolute purpose for any human being (the highest Good), and it isn't just common for everyone, but, when you strive for it, you include the others in a true community.

But that means that the Good isn't just a subjective phenomenon; it is objective, and in a philosophical analysis you begin to see a picture of a hierarchical construction of still higher goods, from the simple ones you can strive for in everyday life to the eternal salvation that can only be sought for its own sake. Since man wants to be in accordance with himself and since the whole area of Good is conform with man, man must freely want the Good; you could be more accurate by saying that man necessarily wants the Good.

However, it is a fact that man once in a while actually chooses the evil and that needs an explanation. First and foremost, this explanation is lack of insight. It is reason which in the given situation can choose the right possibility and then make the will act upon it. But reason can be mistaken; the situation can be confused or you can find yourself in a conflict where it is doubtful which possibility is right. Under these circumstances man can do evil in the false belief that it was the Good.

The source of error could be found in man's desire as well. We've all got our weaknesses, strong inclinations, and we know that in a certain situation we can succumb to them. As we know the near Good is a stronger impulse than the more distant Evil. If you, however, express it in rational categories, you could say that again reason is wrong. It believes it's a greater Good to satisfy the immediate inclination than - if necessary - to give it up because of a more distant Good. And you could add to it that there is a strong urge to fulfil the inclination because you identify with it; without it - and its fulfilment - you weren't yourself.

Even though we no longer express the relation in these terms philosophically, we're faced with everyday phenomena so familiar that we all know them and it's by virtue of this we're able to understand "Macbeth". Macbeth is the man who consciously and freely chooses Evil. He is the tragical figure because he looks like any of us but finds himself in an extreme situation where the act is no longer more or less harmless, but absolute in its consequences. Macbeth's act is a breach with all natural feeling and all natural duties and he knows. Once and for all he does what cannot be done, which cannot be done again or undone, which cannot be withdrawn, which isn't just a partial, maybe big crime, but which destroys a world order. Under cover of dismay he expresses it like this:

"... for from this instant  
There's nothing serious in mortality;  
All is but toys: renown and grace is dead,  
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees  
Is left this vault to brag of." (Act II, scene 3)

2.

That the crime can get such shocking consequences must be understood from Shakespeare's understanding of life. In a medieval way Shakespeare illustrates the world as a harmoniously built hierarchy, and this order is nature. It manifests itself between people when they meet in trust, frankness, integrity and reliability, when they respect the bond of nature: love, sense of duty and devotion. It is a world of light, self-expression and goodness. With his crime Macbeth

has torn this world down. Duncan was his king, his relative and his guest. His crime is therefore not only a murder, but a crime of unnatural nature; it has broken down all the bonds that bind the community together, thus he has brought himself in a quite new situation: a situation of disorder, "unnature" monstrosity and destruction.

In order to explain how "unnature" breaks with nature Shakespeare uses supernature. Demons of darkness rule. What is characteristic about these demons incarnated in the witches is that they don't deprive a man of his own free will; without man's own free will they are without power - they can tempt, lure, pronounce equivocations, but only in combination with man's own disposition and will can they achieve anything. Thus it is correct that the witches take the initiative towards Macbeth, meet him on the heath with triple salutations; but it is just as correct that it is lady Macbeth herself who takes the initiative towards the demons of darkness; she calls them for help in a triple invocation:

Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty.....Come to my women's breasts, and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, whenever in your sightless substances you wait nature's mischief! Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, to cry "Hold, hold". (Act 1 scene 5 line 39-53)

The demoniacal powers are thus not sufficient to explain the consciously evil deed. To Shakespeare it is essential, despite the supernatural, demoniacal forces, to preserve man's integrity as a free and responsible being. That's why you have to ignore the demoniacal and find the real cause in the main characters' mental disposition.

As for Macbeth it is important that he is thoroughly explained to us, before we are introduced to him. The short first scene is a presentation of the demoniacal attempt to tempt Macbeth, and already then do we know a lot. For example there is no attempt to simultaneously tempt Banquo. It would have been in vain. But Macbeth is the typical victim to temptations, that is, he is a man for whom choices are not an obvious thing. In an important situation of choice, the alternatives will occur to him as equally possible - or impossible. His imagination will take possession of them, see through them, weigh them and it would be very complicated for him to reach a conclusion. Only a man of such calibre will it make sense to tempt.

Thereupon we get his friends' opinion of him. It is unequivocal: He is the worthy warrior, the noble man, the loyal thane, and we are told about the reward that awaits him and turns out to be so fatal: The appointment to be Thane of Cawdor. That means we see Macbeth both as the one who lets himself be influenced by others and the one who in a grandiose way can act when it counts. One could say that there is something immature about him, something naive. It's possible to manipulate with his free will and the point of attack is the missing rootedness in his opinion of what is right. "Fair is foul and foul is fair" becomes his principal characterisation.

How will a person of this type react in a decisive situation?. To answer the

question one has to understand two things. In most situations of choice, many possibilities are presented; there is a wide spectrum to choose from and the choice will be within a limited range; it will be of some importance but, it can be withdrawn; you can redecide or ward off the effect if it was wrong. It is in these conditions we find ourselves in normal situations of choice. When, on the other hand, the acute situation of choice occurs, the one that fatefully and irrevocably determines our life, the choice is narrowed down into a dilemma; we are faced with an either/or, where no third possibility is given, and where it's impossible to get through with a compromise.

Secondly, in the acute situation of choice it will be ourselves as human that will be at stake. Its not about some more or less important detail, but its about the Absolute, which unconditionally determines everything. And the question is then, in what sense we under these circumstances have the liberty to choose. That is the situation Macbeth is placed in, the extreme and radical situation of choice. His options are narrowed down to two: either he has to commit the unnatural crime and kill his king, his relative, his guest - or he has to once and for all give up his ambition to be king of Scotland.

In this situation what is the Good? Anyone - Macbeth included - realizes that ethically considered the Good is to give up the ambition. He clearly realizes what it would cost him to choose the other opportunity: loss of eternal salvation and retribution, which will strike him in this world. Cant he then freely choose the good opportunity? Nothing from the outside prevents him, on the contrary it urges him. But there is something else, that prevents him: If he chooses that opportunity, he has to give up all hope of kingship - but he cant, because it would mean that he has to give up himself as Macbeth. He is only Macbeth with that ambition. This has to be rightly understood. We all have our ambitions, more or less. But we dont identify with them. A lot of our ambitions are never fulfilled. It hurts, but it demands from us, that we have the strength to give up without losing ourselves. If one ambition fails, we always have the others, and - the important thing is - we have ourselves.

On the other hand, in a case, where a person has identified himself with one single ambition, it is impossible to give up that ambition; he has nothing to fall back on, not even another ambition, not even himself for that matter, because he is his ambition.

It is therefore in Macbeths situation an impossible question what the Good is. The Good is to preserve yourself, but he is in the narrow situation, that whatever alternative he chooses, it doesnt matter, the result is the same, he loses himself. He is in the regular dilemma, carried out to its extreme consequence: he can't choose. His quite natural reaction is therefore to seek for a third possibility to solve his dilemma. He takes away the possibilities of the dilemma's of their ethical qualifications:

This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. (Act I, sc.3, l.130-131)

and claims that function  
is smothered in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not. (Act 7, sc.3, l.140-142)

What does he do then; he refuses to choose, he seeks extension or he hopes another power will choose for him:

If chance will have me king, why,  
chance may crown me,  
without my stir. (Act 1, sc.3, l.143-145)

To his wife he seeks to postpone the matter:

We will speak further. (Act 1, sc.5, 1.69)

And later:

We will proceed no further in this business. (Act 1, sc. 7, 1. 31)

But that position is impossible. In the dilemma there is not given any third possibility and especially no postponement, because the dilemma is aggressive and demands its solution. What brings about the solution? The rather doubtful belief that he can act without consequences. However clear he has seen that it will cost him salvation, and revenge will strike him, he is by Lady Macbeth's cleverly prepared plan of murder led to the belief that it is possible anyway, without any consequences for him. He suffers from the self-delusion that consequences will only occur, if he is absolutely palpably revealed as a murderer; if the guilt can be placed on the valets, the case is clear. And then he chooses - of own free will - to kill Duncan.

But he has not foreseen the cosmic law. For Shakespeare History plays a certain role, and in that respect he belongs, not to the Middle Ages but to the Renaissance. History is not linear, as it is for us, but it is circular, and the crucial thing is, that it passes in epochs. The word "time" gets its own special meaning. A time is an epoch with a certain structure, and for man it's a matter of being conform with it. To avoid the consequences by the fatal action it is of importance to stop time, let the present time remain, what it is. That is exactly, what Lady Macbeth's belief is possible:

Thy letters have transported me beyond  
This ignorant present, and I feel now  
This future in the instant. (Act 1, sc.5, 1.55-57)

And when she finds out that according to the plan Duncan is going to move on the next day, she bursts out

O, never  
Shall sun that morrow see! (Act 1, sc.5, 1. 59-60)

4.

The importance of these exclamations lies in the human relationship to fate and future. It's always uncertain, and that uncertainty is just another expression of the fact that the dilemma Macbeth is in, is nothing but the daily dilemma of every man. But Lady Macbeth thinks it's possible to anticipate the future and thereby take fate in hand. She has been brought out of the ignorance a man is always in, and thus can now organize her future, so that it is in fact present. In cosmic perspective Macbeth's crime means that he and his "partner of greatness" try to tie up time and make it unchangeable.

But that attempt proves to be in vain.

The attempt causes, however, a schism between what time really is and what Macbeth and his wife are. Therefore they have to "mock the time" by pretending to be the opposite. ("And mock the time with fairest show"), says Lady Macbeth, and that is precisely what they both - in the beginning with luck - try to do. But thereby confidence, frankness, integrity, and the reliability are destroyed. Macbeth and his wife have embarked on the great equivocation, the doubleness and cunning, which occupies such a dominant place in the drama. They want to "equivocate" themselves to the control.

It's not strange they do that. Macbeth is predisposed to that kind of opinion. His attempt to balance the possibilities of the dilemma, to keep them undecided, to seek respite, to leave the decision to other powers, is a mental equivocation. However, what they at last, but too late, learn, is that every equivocation contains its own end. Shakespeare shows it openly by letting them become victims of

a higher form of equivocation: the ambiguous prophecies, which are literally true, but are still formed in such a way that Macbeth must necessarily misunderstand them, and thereby be led to his own destruction. If one focuses on that, one can say that the tragedy is about the essence and the fate of equivocation.

The same can be expressed in the law that any attempt to tie up time, to make it stop, is void. Time goes on. "Time and the hour runs through the roughest day", says Macbeth, and this he says for his own comfort, but the statement shows his mistake. With his crime he has changed time. It has from cosmos sunk into chaos. From that moment he is in hell, because hell isn't a locality, placed somewhere, but is a state, which can be found everywhere. His porter has in the true meaning of the word become porter in hell.

Hell is the dissolution of all natural ties or is to be cut off from the community. As the drama proceeds, Macbeth becomes still more lonely. His dominion is barren. Literally in the sense that he is childless - and lady Macbeth's harsh allegation that she was ready to kill her baby for the sake of the dominion, is therefore significant. The short scene, where Duncan and Banquo at the arrival at Macbeth's castle praise its graceful position, its mild air and the atmosphere of eroticism and natural growing, which the swallows represent, therefore becomes scathingly ironical, when we, the audience, know that here barrenness and wickedness rule. But the barrenness also appears in the fact that Macbeth literally has to create emptiness around himself, has to kill, wipe out his friends. And the barrenness rises to its climax in the last act. Everyone leaves him to gather around the true ruler. Even his wife commits suicide in madness, and his army deserts him. Then he realizes that he has reached the end of the road; his life is buried in the yellow leaves; the only thing left for him is old age, but without all that should be the ornament of old age: honour, affection, awe, and friends; around him now only curses are heard, flattery and idle talk. The roles have been changed; it is now he, who is the object of the others' equivocation, and he lacks the courage to refuse it, because that is the only thing, he has kept.

with that this, however, is the end of his destructive work. When he is killed, the redeeming line can be said: The time is free. Hell has been survived and resurrection has been reached.

If we have to look at the matter from a more philosophic point of view, the unnatural Macbeth creates consists in the thought becoming one with the action. It can be understood psychologically; his earlier attempt to continuously weigh the possibilities, to escape the dilemma by postponing it, was by the intervention of his wife interrupted in the hopeless action. Macbeth thinks to have learned from it:

From this moment  
the firstlings of my heart shall be  
The firstlings of my hand.

1.

#### THE PROBLEM IN "MACBETH"

We have already seen that the focus is on Macbeth and his wife, furthermore, we have seen that the crucial problem is the decision and the act, especially in which sense you can consciously and freely choose to do evil, then do it and then be faced with the consequences. The problem is old. Socrates maintained that no one with full insight in what was evil, would of his own free will do it and that claim had been dominating for almost two millennia. The logical power of this claim was

that it was a tautology or even better; a definition.

Any human activity, to think, to speak, to act, has to focus on a purpose. The definitive impulse to throw yourself into an activity is the urge towards selfpreservation that lies deep in any living creature. That is why man cannot want his selfdestruction; he only wants the Good, understood as that which promotes its own selfpreservation.

If, however, we exclusively define the Good as man's selfpreservation, man's different attempts to achieve this would lead to mutual destruction. If I - and everyone included - unhampered and in absolute selfishness only seek my own, the misfortune I could inflict on someone would naturally be limitless. So there has to be a further addition to the concept of Good.

The Good, we might add, is not only the instantaneous need for satisfaction - in a matter of time it will often turn out to be an evil - but it is in fact the absolute purpose for any human being (the highest Good), and it isn't just common for everyone, but, when you strive for it, you include the others in a true community.

But that means that the Good isn't just a subjective phenomenon; it is objective, and in a philosophical analysis you begin to see a picture of a hierarchical construction of still higher goods, from the simple ones you can strive for in everyday life to the eternal salvation that can only be sought for its own sake. Since man wants to be in accordance with himself and since the whole area of Good is conform with man, man must freely want the Good; you could be more accurate by saying that man necessarily wants the Good.

However, it is a fact that man once in a while actually chooses the evil and that needs an explanation. First and foremost, this explanation is lack of insight. It is reason which in the given situation can choose the right possibility and then make the will act upon it. But reason can be mistaken; the situation can be confused or you can find yourself in a conflict where it is doubtful which possibility is right. Under these circumstances man can do evil in the false belief that it was the Good.

The source of error could be found in man's desire as well. We've all got our weaknesses, strong inclinations, and we know that in a certain situation we can succumb to them. As we know the near Good is a stronger impulse than the more distant Evil. If you, however, express it in rational categories, you could say that again reason is wrong. It believes it's a greater Good to satisfy the immediate inclination than - if necessary - to give it up because of a more distant Good. And you could add to it that there is a strong urge to fulfil the inclination because you identify with it; without it - and its fulfilment - you weren't yourself.

Even though we no longer express the relation in these terms philosophically, we're faced with everyday phenomena so familiar that we all know them and it's by virtue of this we're able to understand "Macbeth". Macbeth is the man who consciously and freely chooses Evil. He is the tragical figure because he looks like any of us but finds himself in an extreme situation where the act is no longer more or less harmless, but absolute in its consequences. Macbeth's act is a breach with all natural feeling and all natural duties and he knows. Once and for all he does what cannot be done, which cannot be done again or undone, which cannot be withdrawn, which isn't just a partial, maybe big crime, but which destroys a world order. Under cover of dismay he expresses it like this:

"... for from this instant  
There's nothing serious in mortality;  
All is but toys: renown and grace is dead,  
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees  
Is left this vault to brag of." (Act II, scene 3)

2.

That the crime can get such shocking consequences must be understood from Shakespeare's understanding of life. In a medieval way Shakespeare illustrates the world as a harmoniously built hierarchy, and this order is nature. It manifests itself between people when they meet in trust, frankness, integrity and

reliability, when they respect the bond of nature: love, sense of duty and devotion. It is a world of light, self-expression and goodness. With his crime Macbeth

has torn this world down. Duncan was his king, his relative and his guest. His crime is therefore not only a murder, but a crime of unnatural nature; it has broken down all the bonds that bind the community together, thus he has brought himself in a quite new situation: a situation of disorder, "unnature" monstrosity and destruction.

In order to explain how "unnature" breaks with nature Shakespeare uses supernature. Demons of darkness rule. What is characteristic about these demons incarnated in the witches is that they don't deprive a man of his own free will; without man's own free will they are without power - they can tempt, lure, pronounce equivocations, but only in combination with man's own disposition and will can they achieve anything. Thus it is correct that the witches take the initiative towards Macbeth, meet him on the heath with triple salutations; but it is just as correct that it is lady Macbeth herself who takes the initiative towards the demons of darkness; she calls them for help in a triple invocation:

Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty.....Come to my women's breasts, and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, whenever in your sightless substances you wait nature's mischief! Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, to cry "Hold, hold". (Act 1 scene 5 line 39-53)

The demoniacal powers are thus not sufficient to explain the consciously evil deed. To Shakespeare it is essential, despite the supernatural, demoniacal forces, to preserve man's integrity as a free and responsible being. That's why you have to ignore the demoniacal and find the real cause in the main characters' mental disposition.

As for Macbeth it is important that he is thoroughly explained to us, before we are introduced to him. The short first scene is a presentation of the demoniacal attempt to tempt Macbeth, and already then do we know a lot. For example there is no attempt to simultaneously tempt Banquo. It would have been in vain. But Macbeth is the typical victim to temptations, that is, he is a man for whom choices are not an obvious thing. In an important situation of choice, the alternatives will occur to him as equally possible - or impossible. His imagination will take possession of them, see through them, weigh them and it would be very complicated for him to reach a conclusion. Only a man of such calibre will it make sense to tempt. Thereupon we get his friends' opinion of him. It is unequivocal: He is the worthy warrior, the noble man, the loyal thane, and we are told about the reward that awaits him and turns out to be so fatal: The appointment to be Thane of Cawdor. That means we see Macbeth both as the one who lets himself be influenced by others and the one who in a grandiose way can act when it counts. One could say that there is something immature about him, something naive. It's possible to manipulate with his free will and the point of attack is the missing rootedness in his opinion of what is right. "Fair is foul and foul is fair" becomes his principal characterisation.

How will a person of this type react in a decisive situation?. To answer the question one has to understand two things. In most situations of choice, many possibilities are presented; there is a wide spectrum to choose from and the choice will be within a limited range; it will be of some importance but, it can be withdrawn; you can redecide or ward off the effect if it was wrong. It is in these conditions we find ourselves in normal situations of choice. When, on the other hand, the acute situation of choice occurs, the one that fatefully and irrevocably determines our life, the choice is narrowed down into a dilemma; we are faced with an either/or, where no third possibility is given, and where it's impossible to get through with a compromise.

Secondly, in the acute situation of choice it will be ourselves as human that will be at stake. Its not about some more or less important detail, but its about the Absolute, which unconditionally determines everything. And the question is then, in what sense we under these circumstances have the liberty to choose. That is the situation Macbeth is placed in, the extreme and radical situation of choice. His options are narrowed down to two: either he has to commit the unnatural crime and kill his king, his relative, his guest - or he has to once and for all give up his ambition to be king of Scotland.

In this situation what is the Good? Anyone - Macbeth included - realizes that ethically considered the Good is to give up the ambition. He clearly realizes what it would cost him to choose the other opportunity: loss of eternal salvation and retribution, which will strike him in this world. Cant he then freely choose the good opportunity? Nothing from the outside prevents him, on the contrary it urges him. But there is something else, that prevents him: If he chooses that opportunity, he has to give up all hope of kingship - but he cant, because it would mean that he has to give up himself as Macbeth. He is only Macbeth with that ambition. This has to be rightly understood. We all have our ambitions, more or less. But we dont identify with them. A lot of our ambitions are never fulfilled. It hurts, but it demands from us, that we have the strength to give up without losing ourselves. If one ambition fails, we always have the others, and - the important thing is - we have ourselves.

On the other hand, in a case, where a person has identified himself with one single ambition, it is impossible to give up that ambition; he has nothing to fall back on, not even another ambition, not even himself for that matter, because he is his ambition.

It is therefore in Macbeths situation an impossible question what the Good is. The Good is to preserve yourself, but he is in the narrow situation, that whatever alternative he chooses, it doesnt matter, the result is the same, he loses himself. He is in the regular dilemma, carried out to its extreme consequence: he can't choose. His quite natural reaction is therefore to seek for a third possibility to solve his dilemma. He takes away the possibilities of the dilemma's of their ethical qualifications:

This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. (Act I, sc.3, 1.130-131)

and claims that function  
is smothered in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not. (Act 7, sc.3, 1.140-142)

What does he do then; he refuses to choose, he seeks extension or he hopes another power will choose for him:

If chance will have me king, why,  
chance may crown me,  
without my stir. (Act 1, sc.3, 1.143-145)

To his wife he seeks to postpone the matter:

We will speak further. (Act 1, sc.5, 1.69)

And later:

We will proceed no further in this bu

